

To: Dr. Sullivan
From: Anita Reich
Date: September 9, 2004
Subject: Discourse Community Report

Dear Dr. Sullivan,

Following is the assignment required for English 320, the discourse community field report. It pertains to the local Chamber of Commerce, based on the Glenwood/Mills County Chamber of Commerce in Mills County, Iowa. It discusses the discourse community as a general concept and applies the concept to the field of the local Chamber of Commerce.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Anita Reich

The Discourse Community
Within The Local Chamber of Commerce

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September 9, 2004
English 320
Dr. Dale Sullivan

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Abstract

The following report attempts to explain the practice of discourse community within the realm of the local level chamber of commerce. The introduction defines the concepts of both discourse and community, as well as the model of discourse community as it is set within a small town and county in western Iowa. It also presents the situation as the author understands it, and in the following section briefly explains the methods used for research. Finally, it offers the results of the research and offers conclusions gained from the insight of the results.

I. Introduction

Recently I moved to a small town in Mills County, Iowa. Once, a booming town of industry and jobs, Malvern is now a quiet, pretty community of a few tiny businesses, with little recreation, no shopping, and very limited communication within the community. It is however, surrounded on all sides, by similar townships in the county that have created small networks of handmade and personal companies. It is neighbored to the west by the cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs at 30 miles away. Within 10 miles is the town of Glenwood, which holds the ‘Glenwood/Mills County Chamber of Commerce & Economic Development Foundation’ for the entire county of Mills.

It was my goal to research the discourse community within the Mills County Chamber of Commerce. I wanted to find out the ways in which this faction conveys ideas and imparts information to its members, and also to the towns that it serves. I was curious to know the ways that it integrates the towns under one Chamber, while maintaining the integrity of each town’s individuality. I was also interested to find how one establishes a discourse community – in a town that doesn’t seem to have a communication process in place at all.

To begin, one must define what a discourse community is. Discourse is basically defined as a dialogue or communication. Community is generally described as a group of people. So, a discourse community is a group of people who communicate, and who must have a reason or reasons for doing so. According to Brown and Yule, analysis of the discourse community is the assessment of a language text set in a specific framework “to express meanings and achieve intentions” (26). Further, Davies points out that the

constituents involved in this community are people who feel they have a right to articulate themselves and who believe that their opinions and ideas can shape the nature of the discourse involved (30).

It is interesting to note, at this point, that there is a growing attention being given to the concept of community in general. There is, in fact, a movement that calls itself “communitarianism” that is focused on recovering neighborhood and the sense of community as support and interaction and caring, as a place in which people know and care for one another. It is a noteworthy concept, when regarding a small-town chamber of commerce trying to find its way in the 21st century, where globalization and split-second world-wide communication can make community sound like an outdated and old-fashioned concept. The question may be – how do we join this 21st century of global ideas and communication, while maintaining our sense of local community? This concept of community is significant when regarding the small community chamber of commerce.

Communication in today’s world is a complex and fascinating situation. With technology and equipment to relay thoughts across continents at lightning speed, it is possible to communicate with thousands of people with a press of a button. However, communication *is* generally done on a smaller scale, globally and populace-wise. With those same large-scale capabilities, we usually correspond within a group or groups of our peers – people who are assembled together for a common purpose and who need communication to accomplish their purposes, (Borg, 398). This group is known as a discourse community.

This definition, this naming, of this entity, unexpectedly gives it a power and a presence that, undefined, it does not carry. Now we see the importance and significance of understanding what it is, how it works, who is involved, and how to navigate within it.

The following report will focus on the methods and results involved in investigating a small county-wide chamber of commerce, as a way to understand how a new constituent can participate and maneuver within the system, what interactions are most effective, and how to develop a sense of community inside the constituent-town, as well as within the county chamber.

II. Methods

Research into the concept of discourse communities began on the world-wide web. Because the concept of discourse community was unfamiliar, I took the approach of simply understanding a new concept. From there, I continued with web-research into the field of chambers of commerce as discourse communities. Again, this was unknown territory personally, so I focused research on the state of Iowa and the chambers developed in this state.

With the background in place, I then conducted an interview with the director of the local chamber of commerce, the Glenwood/Mills County Chamber of Commerce & Economic Development Board. Linda Washburn oversees the chamber activities of an entire county of nine small towns, and it was necessary to understand the dynamics of both the chamber and the county, as well as how the town of Malvern, and its neighboring towns to the east, fit into the bigger picture.

Finally, documents from the chamber were collected, and one was selected to be examined and explained here. Because documents were limited, the monthly newsletter

will be the text of focus for this analysis. Throughout the process of web-research as well as the interview, the chamber newsletter appears to be the universal component most widely used to communicate with chamber members.

III. Results

A chamber of commerce is widely acknowledged as the fundamental starting point of contact when needing information about a community. It is established as an information center to citizens and visitors, as well as a major resource base for new residents to the community. In conjunction with that activity, the chamber is then founded on a wide base of its own affiliates – the business owners and managers of the community – and the chamber office works to serve those constituents as well. Again, it acts as an information center to those businesses, and also serves as a foundation of discourse and planning, as well as advertising and support for these enterprises.

The field that this paper focuses on is the local-level chamber of commerce. Research shows that most chambers are established on the municipal level, and so services one town or city. In this case, the Glenwood/Mills County Chamber of Commerce services an entire county, with nine municipalities. (In addition, there are state-wide chambers that are made up of representatives from each local office, and the nation-wide chamber, the US Chamber of Commerce. These state and national associations are a way for local chambers to connect to other chambers to gain information and exchange ideas about chamber policies and procedures.)

To understand how a local chamber office corresponds on so many different levels, it was necessary to understand its communication practices. Because a chamber

of commerce is essentially rooted almost entirely on the practices of communication, the results of the research were quite unmistakable at basic levels.

The essential aspects of correspondence, both within and without of the chamber office – are the monthly newsletters, and the chamber websites. These are an easy way to access information about community interests as well as chamber activities. They are available to members and non-members alike, and allow an overview of most current and relevant happenings in the community.

Another primary characteristic of chamber communication is the telephone and email. These are the basic ways in which the members of the chamber, and citizens and visitors alike, can contact someone in the area – the chamber representative - who has a bird’s eye view of that neighborhood’s activities, regulations, information and resources. This is in addition to the less frequently used post-mail as a way to address question and answer matters and information issues.

Finally, there is the forum of chamber meetings. This is a way for chamber members to discuss issues and exchange information and ideas. These are done on a regular basis at the local level, and are open to anyone in the community. On the local level, these meetings ideally can sustain the business community as a cooperative, keeping the chamber members current and offering a support system to the business environment.

During the interview with my own local chamber director, Linda Washburn, it was apparent that she is working basically on her own, and that much of her time during the day is spent doing what she calls ‘resourcing’, which she defines as taking numerous phone calls for information. She describes her job as a “resource to the community”, and

so she personally responds to an array of questions such as: how to find swimming classes, where to locate a piano teacher, or how to go about paying a speeding ticket. Recently, a call came from the new Harley Davidson store on the highway, regarding the necessary measures to obtain a beer permit for the grand opening. She explained that she uses whatever method is most convenient and most immediate to the specific situation, and that is largely telephone and email. She stated firmly that it was a cardinal rule that every question gets a response.

Another prevalent form of interaction in her daily work is writing, with the chief purposes being to send thank-you cards to various people – anyone who has supported the community in any way, and to write letters of support for businesses looking for assistance and funding. She also puts together personalized information for new businesses, as well as ‘welcome-to-the-neighborhood’ packets when requested by private parties moving into the community. She indicated that these are done to establish good rapport and to show appreciation for efforts of support.

Finally, there is the essential chamber newsletter. This is generally a monthly publication, and can take several forms. Many of them are available on the chamber websites, are sent via email, and can be extremely appealing and visually interesting. Others are typed manually, and stapled by hand. Because Linda works alone, and services such a wide variety of personal issues, the last newsletter was May, 2004. There is no website for the office, and no database established in which to send the publications by email, so it is a manual job that takes up a great deal of time and energy. When asked if there was an expected format to the newsletter, she replied, “No, there isn’t. The one thing that I do always include is, on the back page of the newsletter, I always put this

reminder to shop locally, and the reminder that ‘Chamber Bucks’ are available,” (to spend at member businesses).

The chamber newsletter accomplishes innumerable objectives in one publication. It can provide its constituents with the coming month’s activities and support efforts, as well as give public appreciation and congratulations to parties that have contributed in the past month’s efforts. It can celebrate the past month’s accomplishments on one page, and offer effective advertising on the next. In these ways, the newsletter proficiently ties the past with the future, giving a business that is involved both a pat on the back and an incentive to stay involved.

One newsletter I explored in depth achieves these objectives flawlessly, and exemplifies the perfect combination of cheers to the past and inspiration for the future. The cover page boldly proclaims the name of the publication, along with a one-line explanation of what it is. It then presents a headline story, along with the contents of the issue. These contents are not treated as dull secondary events – they endeavor to make a promising statement, with captions such as “Beat of the Cities” and “My Waterloo Days”. Again, the front page itself resourcefully ties in the past with the future by proclaiming an enthusiastic “Thank You” to specific past contributors, as a seamless part of the table of contents.

Inside the 12-page publication, each page has its own compelling and colorful heading across the top, with captions like ‘Leadership Report’, ‘News and Events’, ‘Member Moments’ and ‘Member Highlights’. Following are subheadings highlighted with color and exclamation points, effectively drawing the reader into the story.

Imbedded within this creative and captivating publication is a 4-page “Economic Indicators” report, with statistical information on the area and a quarterly breakdown of activities ranging from real estate activity to the area’s labor summary. Like the rest of the newsletter, this section has engaging headings and color photos to draw the reader’s eye into the material.

Throughout this chamber newsletter, a reader can certainly develop a sense of enthusiasm, as well as confidence. One feels as though the chamber is energized and eager to promote, thank and support its members. At the same time, the thorough and well-presented information gives its members a sense of assurance and trust in its chamber as a leader and sentinel for them.

Summary and Conclusions

The standard local chamber of commerce is a touchstone of information and communication. This is evident from the introductory element of making a first impression on new citizens and tourists, to making a true and lasting impact on the business environment and collective society.

When I first began this process of discovering the discourse community of the chamber of commerce, I had only the vaguest ideas of what a chamber of commerce does. I knew it only as a sort of tourism office – a stop to find a map, a bed and breakfast, a rafting guide – beyond that, I had no idea what it represented. To my surprise, it is a major component of the business environment and the local community.

To my further surprise, I am not alone in my lack of awareness. When I asked my fellow merchants in my new community why they were not members of the Mills County Chamber of Commerce – not one of them belong – the standard responses were

along the lines of: “I never thought of it; it never occurred to me; or a flat: ‘what?’”. When I suggested to my friend that she might apply to the same chamber for funding support for tourism brochures, she had no idea what I was talking about.

For a chamber of commerce to reach its full potential, it must utilize all of the communication opportunities it has at its disposal. I found that I was correct in my theory that my small town had few communication processes in effect. What came as a surprise to me was the fact that so many other people in the community lacked the essential facts needed in order to learn information and share ideas with one another, and that the chamber office had little to no impact on them.

In defining the discourse community, the words started out as a simple and ineffectual phrase in the beginning. Realizing that the two components in the phrase were both imperative to each other, and that the sum of these two words were a dimension of communication that is so vital to a group, makes this research only the beginning a lifetime learning process, and the threshold of a new frontier for myself, and for my new community.

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