Discourse Communities: From Origins to Social Media

Deoksoon Kim and Oksana Vorobel

Abstract
Discourse communities, their characteristic features and communicative routines, have long been a focus of research. The expansion of technology has changed discourse communities, however, because a much broader set of members can now participate in them. Contemporary research has begun to explore how technology-mediated discourse communities form and change, as well as how they serve educational and other social functions. In this chapter, we review research on discourse communities, focusing on the various changes...
that mediated online environments such as social media have brought to contemporary discourse communities. We also describe advances in and the challenges of conducting research on discourse communities established through social media.

**Keywords**

Academic discourse • Computer-mediated discourse • Digital discourse • Discourse communities • Language socialization • Social media

**Introduction**

The development of social media has had a major influence on discourse communities, changing how people join communities and participate in them. Social media rely on Internet-based websites and mobile applications that enable users to generate and share their own content and do social networking (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). As Zourou and Lamy (2013, p. 1) argue, social media create “artefacts with a networking dimension, which are designed so as to make that dimension central to their use.” Social media provide a communicative medium through which people are rapidly and intensively creating new kinds of discourse communities. These contexts have a number of affordances, features that encourage users to create new kinds of connections, information, and social actions.

Earlier work on communities and new media provides a framework for our account of how social media are transforming discourse communities. Vossen and Hagemann (2010, p. 59) define “virtual online communities” as “groups of people with common interests who interact through the Internet and the Web, such as communities of transactions and communities of interests.” Along similar lines, Thorne, Sauro, and Smith (2015) describe how social media discourse can increase cohesion and group identification. This work shows how contemporary discourse communities cross national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, forming strong social identities and sometimes transforming individual and group trajectories. We follow this emphasis on how complex, hybrid identities are central to discourse communities.

In this chapter, we build on the approaches pioneered by Vossen and Hagemann; Thorne, Sauro, and Smith; and others, describing recent research on the transformation of discourse communities through social media. We first review early definitions of “discourse communities,” laying out the origins of key concepts. The rest of the chapter reviews empirical studies of discourse communities and social media, particularly in higher education. We focus on the role that social media play in language socialization into academic discourse communities and the use of social media as a community-building tool. At the end of the chapter, we describe continuing problems and difficulties and provide methodological suggestions for future research on social media and discourse communities.
Early Developments: The Concept of “Discourse Communities”

Research on discourse communities goes back to the 1970s, to the study of “scientific communities” in science (Kuhn 1970), “speech communities” in sociolinguistics (Hymes 1972), and “discourse communities” in composition research (Bizzell 1982). Kuhn (1970) defined scientific communities as groups of scientists working in a particular scientific area who share similar educational backgrounds, professional areas, and scientific goals which facilitate their professional communication. The defining feature of interpretive communities is members’ ability to read and interpret literary works. Speech communities are groups of people who communicate and know how and when to use linguistic signs in appropriate ways, in cultural context (Hymes 1972). Discourse communities differ from other communities in their primary focus on shared expectations among members, which are reflected in discourse conventions and determined by discourse community members’ work (Bizzell 1982).

These seminal definitions of discourse communities vary in some important ways. In a key paper published in 1990, Swales articulates the difference between “speech communities” and “discourse communities.” He describes how such aspects as medium of communication (speech versus literacy), the dominant factor in the communicative functioning of a community (the needs of the group versus the goals of the actors) and criteria for belonging to the community (“birth, accident, or adoption” versus specialty and interest), help clarify the difference between the two notions and highlight the need to define “discourse communities” more carefully (p. 471). Swales’ definition has six components: members of a discourse community have shared goals, shared means of communication, provide information and feedback as the primary purpose of participation, use and feel ownership of one or more genres in discourse, use specific lexical items, and have a common level of expertise. Swales’ (1990) study was a step forward in the attempt to define discourse communities, although not everyone agrees with every component of his definition. It is clear that a discourse community is narrower than a speech community, as it involves a group communicating for a more specific purpose. Work still remains to be done in defining the boundaries of and overlap between communities, however.

In 1997, Anne Beaufort explored how to operationalize the concept of a discourse community in her investigation of a nonprofit organization. She identified several critical features of discourse communities: they involve oral and written communication, the use of specific genres, and the distribution of roles for writers based on tasks and contextual needs. She also explored the values and goals of the discourse community, the distance between members of a discourse community, the tools of communication, and each member’s individual background, values, goals, and skills that can influence communication in the community. Beaufort offers a model which shows the dynamic relationship and mutual influence of various factors in any discourse community, and she describes how different discourse communities can vary on many of these dimensions. Swales’ (1990) and Beaufort’s (1997) studies provided a solid foundation for further research on discourse communities in various disciplines.
Over time, among the various aspects of discourse communities, it is the context and the tools of communication that scholars have most often focused on. The development of technology from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 marked a drastic shift in the use of technology, from a means to access information to a new means of communication. Social media tools such as wikis and social networking websites have become new venues for discourse communities as they invite action and creation, afford access and originality, and enhance participation and collaboration. The rapid spread of technology has fundamentally changed many discourse communities and their characteristic features.

Major Contributions

In this section, we review studies on discourse communities and social media in education. We pay particular attention to the role of social media in new members’ language socialization into discourse communities in higher education. We also consider research on the use of social media as a community-building tool in education.

Language Socialization into Academic Discourse Communities: Digital Discourse and Social Media

Duff (2010) analyzes socialization into oral, written, and online academic discourse, and the social practices associated with each mode, across educational contexts. She defines “academic discourse” as “forms of oral and written language and communication – genre, registers, graphics, linguistic structures, interactional patterns – that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalized, or ritualized” in various academic contexts (p. 175). She shows how these aspects of discourse vary across disciplines and professional areas, both in interaction and in various forms of representation. She also shows how academic discourse is evolving, as new genres emerge, with new linguistic, discursive, and multimodal conventions.

Increasingly, academic discourse communities are mediated in significant part by various technological tools, including social media. These new media environments involve what has been called “digital discourse,” a broad concept which covers metadiscursive framings, genres, style, and stylization as well as ideological stance (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Digital discourse has semiotic characteristics including coherence and cohesion, or texture and flow (Gee 2015); intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Vásquez 2015); a dialogic character, the interaction between readers and writers and between human users and machines (Jones 2015); multimodality; and reflexivity, the ability to analyze input and customize based on human actions (Jones 2015). These semiotic characteristics are deeply influenced by various affordances of social media such as hyperlinking and tagging.

Recent work on digital discourse, applied to academic contexts, has shown that new media have distinctive affordances for learning. These include the multimodality of digital discourse, which allows for new combinations of meaning and
interpretation; the creation of new genres of social interaction made possible through social media; the opportunity for remixing and “curating” practices, through which content is recycled in ways heretofore not possible; hypertextual linking, embedding, copying and pasting, liking, tagging, and other means of connecting and combining resources; and the lamination of virtual reality layers onto each other and real-time actions.

Important work in this area has focused on students learning how to become a part of academic discourse communities, a process that is often studied in terms of learners’ language socialization into academic discourse communities. Duff (2010) defines academic discourse socialization as “a dynamic, socially situated process that in contemporary contexts is often multimodal, multilingual, and highly intertextual as well. The process is characterized by variable amounts of modeling, feedback, and uptake; different levels of investment and agency on the part of learners; by the negotiation of power and identities; and, often, important personal transformations for at least some participants” (p. 169). By participating in new academic discourse communities, learners develop both cognitively and socially.

Potts (2005) studies language socialization in social media contexts, exploring graduate students’ language socialization into a larger academic discourse community in the context of an online bulletin board in WebCT. Four nonnative speakers of English, students in a graduate seminar on modern language education, provided data through participation in online bulletin board, individual interviews, and a written survey. By following these focal participants, Potts shows how students can form a community characterized by high levels of interaction, interactivity, and shared purpose. The students’ subjective experiences and their coconstruction of knowledge across the course allowed them to create a community with its own meditational tools, located within but not determined by a larger academic discourse community. The online bulletin board afforded the participants an increased sense of visibility, additional time due to the asynchronous mode of communication, the ability to review the prior postings, and, most importantly, a dialogic context. The students’ participation in an online context allowed them to position themselves as active, equal community members.

Yim (2011) studies graduate students in face-to-face and online contexts with L1 and L2 participants. Her study focuses on the characteristics of asynchronous online discourse, its formation and challenges, as well as participant roles that second language graduate students adopt when interacting online. The L1 and L2 students in two mixed-mode graduate courses used WebCT for access to course materials, emailing, chat, and online bulletin board discussions. The results of the study show that the online bulletin board served as a platform for students’ academic discussion and dialogue about course materials. L1 and L2 participants posted equally in quality and quantity, but there was a difference in instructors’ methods and pedagogical goals that influenced participants’ discourse across the two courses – rigid and formulaic versus interpersonal and interactive, respectively. There was also a difference in L2 students’ writing between the two courses: one had a more casual, personal tone while the other had a more formal, academic tone. Overall, the L2 students were more confident when writing academic papers than when participating.
in the online bulletin board. In both courses the L2 students more actively participated in the online bulletin board, in contrast to their more limited, passive participation in the face-to-face context. Nonetheless, the online context with its various technological tools provided L2 learners increased opportunities for learning.

Social Media as a Discourse Community Building Tool in Education

In addition to research on the influence of social media on socialization into academic discourse communities, others have studied the use of various types of social media in order to build discourse communities in educational settings. This work has shown how social media provide an important new platform through which educational discourse communities are formed, and it has explored the affordances that new technologies offer for facilitating certain kinds of communities, practices, and identities. Schriner and Rice (1989), for example, conducted a two-year study of 15 sections of Introductory Composition at the University of Michigan. They explored how students formed a community by using asynchronous discussion posts in CONFER, an online conferencing tool. Their findings show that collaboration in CONFER allowed students to express their voices and become community members, while developing their own interpretations of the matter under discussion through negotiation and dialogue. The conferencing tool also facilitated the social construction of knowledge and enhanced students’ feeling of responsibility for their education.

Edens and Gallini (2000) employed a discourse analytic approach to investigate preservice teachers’ dialogic processes of knowledge building and meaning making when sharing early field experiences in a technology-mediated community. They also explored the use of asynchronous Internet discussion as a discourse community building tool. The data included students’ postings in online class discussion groups and in an informal on-campus focus group discussion. The findings show how online discussions afforded the development of a discourse community outside the classroom as well as robust co-construction of meaning. Along similar lines, Kim and Jang (2014) give examples of how preservice teachers used blogs and podcasts to collaborate and coconstruct knowledge in a teacher education course. Blogs and podcasts provided preservice teachers opportunities to learn, scaffold each other’s contributions, and build a robust discourse community. They trace how these students in an online class created a supportive, dialogic learning community in which they were able to share their ideas, check their progress, complete assignments, and offer constructive feedback.

In order to understand the relationship between a traditional face-to-face classroom and an online social (private Google+) educational environment, Clayton, Hettche, and Kim (Clayton et al. 2014) investigated students’ participation, focusing on its quality and intensity across contexts in an Integrated Marketing Communications course. They found that a majority of students who actively participated in the face-to-face classroom context behaved the same way online in a social media context, perhaps due to individual factors and preexisting interest in the subject matter. They offer suggestions for choosing an effective social media tool for
building a discourse community, setting expectations about students’ contributions in discussions across contexts, and distributing roles for students in online communities. They argue that, despite many similarities in participation across face-to-face and online contexts, technological tools can provide a wider range of options for building discourse communities among students, enhancing their membership in the group and supporting their learning.

In general, researchers have found that social media tools effectively promote collaboration and encourage the social construction of knowledge. The online environment facilitates the intentional building of a discourse community devoted to learning. Such environments also provide opportunities to extend discourse communities to new members because of the potential reach of online technologies.

**Work in Progress: New Practices and Emerging Methodologies**

Because of all the changes new digital media have brought to discourse communities and education, discourse analysts have had to adapt existing methods of discourse analysis and create new approaches. The publication of books like *Discourse 2.0. Language and new media* (Tannen and Trester 2013), *Discourse and digital practices: Doing discourse analysis in the digital age* (Jones et al. 2015), and others illustrates a variety of new approaches to discourse analysis that have emerged to study the new discourse communities created by digital media.

One important characteristic of recent studies of digital discourse is researchers’ emphasis on the need for an interdisciplinary approach, combining frameworks and approaches so as to capture the complexity of digital media and new forms of discourse. Studies draw insights from cybernetics, media theory (Jones 2015), and haptics (Merchant 2015), for example. Complex recent approaches to discourse analysis include multimodal discourse analysis (Jones et al. 2015), computer-assisted discourse analysis (Baker 2010), postphenomenological philosophy of technology and artifacts (Verbeek 2006), object ethnography (Carrington and Dowdall 2013), and a social practice approach to language use online (Barton and Lee 2013). Digital discourse analysis often includes ethnography as well as archival work (Wortham and Reyes 2015).

Many researchers have been exploring technology-human interactions as new forms of communication where technology can serve as a text itself, have its own agency and history, and shape human interactions and actions. Gee (2015), for example, analyzes games as multimodal texts, exploring their syntax and semantics, their interface with human vision, and focusing on their “packaging” and “flow.” Jones (2015) explores self-tracking practices and their influence on people and their actions. Barton (2015) focuses on tagging as a social practice and how relevant spaces are designed and used by people. Carrington (2015) investigates the interaction between iPhones as technological artifacts and their users. Such studies respond to changes in the nature of discourse, in the era of social media, by extending discourse analysis so that it can illuminate more complex human-technology interactions.
New online discourse practices have challenged traditional ways of understanding discourse communities. Now we have to explore intertextuality and interdiscursivity in online consumer reviews, for example, and how they form discourse communities in the digital world (Vásquez 2015). Intertextuality involves relationships among texts, in both digitally mediated and other types of discourse. In the process of constructing any text, speakers, writers, and users of digital media in particular draw not only on the whole range of intertextual links but also on knowledge of conventional genres. Internet discourse is more often “hybrid” because it mixes genres and facilitates wider linking across domains and types. Recent work on social media and discourse communities continues to discover internally complex layers of social media and how they are creating new kinds of communities. The next section discusses work on the affordances of social media for the formation of discourse communities.

Discourse Communities and Affordances of Social Media

Although many empirical studies have recently been published on the affordances of Web 2.0 tools for learning and teaching, research on the affordances of social media for discourse communities is in its early stages. Matsuda (2002) provides one early, influential study. He investigates online discourse in a Japanese email discussion list. His analysis focuses on identity and power in this Japanese online discourse community. Specifically, Matsuda explores the transformation of social relations among Japanese professionals from various contexts, attending to such conventional aspects of identity as gender, age, and social status. He finds that other criteria are just as important in an online context, such as the amount of knowledge demonstrated. His findings show that the online context provides an alternative platform for the negotiation of identity and power. It does not diminish the hierarchical social relations which could be found in offline communities, but it changes their character in noticeable ways.

Farabaugh (2007) also studies the affordances social media have for discourse communities. Her longitudinal study explores the affordances of two wikis, “QwikiWiki” and “MediaWiki,” as platforms for students’ writing exercises and reflections, especially their comprehension of metaphor, in a course on Shakespeare in the context of the “Writing to Learn” movement in the United States. Her findings show that wikis can be an excellent platform for improving students’ reading and writing, as they enhance students’ awareness about literature. Wikis provide an easy way to complete short assignments, enhance students’ engagement in out-of-class group work through asynchronous interaction, and allow students to structure their online interaction independently. The dynamic nature and versatile functions of social media provide many affordances for learning in academic contexts and create various types of discourse communities that learners participate in while engaging in tasks.
Computer-Mediated Discourse

Another aspect of discourse communities, which needs further research because of changes brought by technology and use of social media, is the discourse itself. Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is language use mediated through networked computer or mobile devices (Herring 2007). While digital discourse is a broader term, CMD is mainly used in reference to practices and research approaches. Early work on CMD (e.g., Ferrara et al. 1991) described it as an “emergent register” of interactive written discourse. Crystal’s (2001) analysis of language use on the internet shows how CMD is related to both spoken and written discourse, involving both synchronous and asynchronous components. Cherny (1999) provides an empirical description of online conversation in an early multiuser dimension (MUD), emphasizing participants’ membership in an online community and examined the dynamics of one MUD community.

Herring (2007) and Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) provide more contemporary and comprehensive accounts. Text-based CMD includes email, discussion forums, newsgroups, chat, MUDs (multiuser dimensions) and MOOs (object-oriented MUDs), blogs, microblogs, and wikis. Herring (2007) argues that language use in computer-mediated communication involves some distinctive features that must be studied in their own right. She describes two broad types of CMD, one focused on the medium (technological) and one on the situation (social). Technological facets include, for example, available channels of communication, synchronicity, one-way versus two-way message transmission, message persistence, message format, and size of message buffer. Situational facets include group size, participant characteristics, purpose of communication, topic, norms of social appropriateness, and code or language variety used.

Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) focus their analysis of CMD on web 2.0. They focus on four dimensions: (1) modality, involving unique forms of writing or speech that are situated along a continuum from asynchronous to synchronous modes; (2) modes, genres, and discourse types, including private email, electronic mailing lists, web forums, chat, instant messaging, and blogging – all of which afford different types of discourse; and (3) multiple facets, which “cut across the boundaries of sociotechnical modes and combine to allow for the identification of a nuanced set of CMD types,” based on Herring’s previous classification of “discourse 2.0” (Herring 2007, p. 4). Web 2.0 environments generally involve the cooccurrence or convergence of different modes of communication on a single platform, as well as new types of content, new contexts, new usage patterns, and multiauthorship, joint discourse production, and user adoption.

CMD also involves various types of discourse structures, such as utterance level, messages, exchanges, and threads or conversations. Meaning in CMD is continuously constituted throughout engagement in situated discourse. The pragmatic meanings are carried in words, utterances, emoticons, descriptive messages, descriptive genres, conventions, performativity, and through intertextuality. CMD also involves interactional aspects, including one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many relationships. Social practices mediated through CMD involve key dimensions
of variation and linguistic diversity, interaction and identity, and discourse and engagement (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015).

CMD is an important new phenomenon in the contemporary world, and it needs to be studied more extensively in its own right. To understand the rich, diverse, dynamic nature of CMD, we need to attend to the discourse going on in emerging media and platforms, exploring new contexts as technologies rapidly develop and extending our research methods to better understand the functioning of discourse communities.

Problems and Difficulties

Defining the Concept

Research on discourse communities continues, but familiar problems with the concept still cause difficulties. Joseph Harris (1989) critiqued the concept of discourse communities for its abstract imagined homogeneity. Marilyn Cooper (1989) argued that the concept of discourse communities was usually perceived independent of context, as if communities were stable, without taking into account the variety of practices, processes, and agents. With the major influence of technology and social media in providing a new medium for discourse communities, the need for redefining the concept has become clearer. Digital discourse communities are even more complex, involving multiple, heterogeneous linkages that change quickly and assume various configurations.

In the contemporary world, discourse communities’ digital practices are not restricted to online or offline contexts, but often cross physical and virtual boundaries as well as technological and social systems. The lack of a solid definition challenges contemporary research on discourse communities and raises questions about its future. It is a challenge to establish analytic boundaries and define the overlap among communities. This complexity has been complicated by the emergence of new concepts such as “communities of practice,” “online communities,” “communities of communication,” “affinity spaces,” and related concepts (Gee 2005; Jürgens 2012; Lam 2008; Lave and Wenger 1991; Yim 2011). The term “community of practice” from Lave and Wenger (1991), for example, brings more questions about the boundaries and differences between communities.

Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as a group of people who are engaged in some common practice over some time. It is characterized by shared engagement and understanding, with opportunities for mutual construction of meaning. Work on communities of practice describes how collective learning in a shared social space can produce group cohesion and performance, as well as shape individual trajectories into the group. Discourse communities also involve shared concerns, passions, and practices. As Lave and Wenger describe, members of these communities develop shared learning and understanding, and they facilitate the incorporation of new members. Groups change, however, and over time the shared practices and understandings shift. Individuals can also have varying stances toward
these practices and understandings. Lave and Wenger provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the important processes of group cohesion, learning, and development. Meanwhile, the overlap between their concept and “discourse communities” foregrounds the need to develop clear definitions.

In elaborating the concept of “affinity spaces,” Gee (2005) points out the aforementioned questions about membership, participation, and boundaries in the use of the term “communities of practices.” The term normally implies close personal connections between members, but this does not characterize most technologically mediated communities, which exist across physical and virtual spaces. Gee proposes the alternative concept of “affinity spaces,” defined as a semiotically mediated social space characterized by members’ common endeavor, a shared space where people affiliate with others based on their shared activities, interests, and common goals, as well as a place where informal learning happens. In such spaces, members of discourse communities participate in common activities and practices without members being segregated based on proficiency, a variety of forms of and routes to participation and status. Gee points out the relevance of the term for today’s high-tech world and the digital practices of various communities. Gee’s introduction of the concept of “affinity spaces” further underlines the need to clarify the concept of “discourse communities.”

Eva Lam (2008) has done important work on how immigrant youth participates in online, interest-based communities across transnational spaces, and this helps with the definition of the concept. She traces how immigrant youth participate in online communities across host and home countries, showing the impact of transnational relationships on their cultural and linguistic practices. She also analyzes how participation in digital discourse communities shapes students’ multilingual identities. Along similar lines, Thorne, Sauro, and Smith (2015) describe how social media discourse can increase cohesion and group identification. Their work shows how contemporary discourse communities can cross national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, forming strong social identities and sometimes transforming individual and group trajectories. In this chapter, we follow this emphasis on complex, hybrid identities as central to the effects of socially mediated discourse communities.

All of this work highlights the need to develop the concept of discourse communities so that it can be productively used in analyses of new technologically mediated environments. With the rapid and extensive spread of social media and digital discourse, we have an opportunity to reflect on the changing nature of discourse communities and clarify the meaning of the term for a new era. We can best accomplish this by approaching the concept in an ecological way, that is, by viewing discourse communities holistically as an ecological system with diverse agents bound by shared discourse conventions, relationships, processes, and actions (van Lier 2004). The agents in a discourse community are also influenced by and function in a social context. We view such context not as a physical or virtual space, but as any combination of spaces where participants in the discourse communities engage in communication using multiple modalities and modes. Discourse communities are complex systems involving participants of diverse expertise bound by and functioning in a relevant context, which comprises a set of physical and virtual spaces that
Conducting Research

Another challenge brought by the strong influence of social media on contemporary discourse communities is methodological: How do we conduct research in communities maintained through new digital technologies? After reviewing research literature on “digital methods” (Rogers 2009), that is, studying behavior online using medium-specific methods, Jürgens (2012) identifies four broad difficulties. The first problem is assessing the representativeness of data collected online when the structure of the virtual space is unknown, which leads to validity issues for quantitative or mixed method research conducted online. A second difficulty lies in the unknown relationship between online and offline behavior of the participants and the role of technology in shaping their behavior. Third, protecting participants’ privacy when investigating data in an online context is more challenging due to digital traces left in the online medium. Finally, researchers face enormous amounts of digital data, which requires powerful computers, software, and statistical methods, as well as problems with unexpected loss of information and difficulties avoiding errors while accessing large data sets.

Jürgens (2012) provides a solid foundation for identifying and solving methodological problems conducting research in an online context. All of his concerns are relevant to studies on discourse communities and social media. For example, making relevant observations is easier in the face-to-face context, and it can be problematic in studies of asynchronous discourse communities. Analysis of data collected from various social media websites (e.g., Twitter tweets, chat in Skype, and Facebook posts) can be problematic when researchers are insufficiently familiar with new and rapidly changing genres. The constantly changing nature of social media requires close attention when considering research design and methodology for studies on discourse communities.

Digital technology is not only an object of research but also a research tool. We need innovative research methods to study it. A few scholars have argued that heterogeneous research methods are required to study the digital world. Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) explore several research methods for studying discourse communities, using various technological tools such as text messages, online gossip, a language-learning community in Facebook, microblogging, online photo sharing, and YouTube video. Jones (2011) highlights a method for studying “computer-mediated discourse,” corpus-based analysis of texting, as well as “mediated discourse analysis.” This is “a perspective on discourse that focuses on how texts and other cultural tools mediate human activities and social identity” (p. 322). Recently, Jones et al. (2015) have described various ways of researching discursive components of new communication practices in various digital contexts, such as discourse analysis of gaming (Gee 2015), analysis of YouTube texts (Benson 2015), identity
formation in virtual worlds (Hafner 2015), and content analysis of blogs (Fisher and Kim 2013).

New tools and web applications provide diverse spaces for connecting to others and exposing learners to various genres of discourse. We need to understand the new activities afforded by these media and design better ways to analyze the new kinds of conversations taking place in these media. Our research methods will need to expand to meet this new challenge.

**Future Directions**

While there are clear challenges in conducting research on discourse communities constituted partly through social media, the topic is essential for contemporary educational researchers. We need to develop a conceptual framework that provides a holistic vision of discourse communities situated in technologically mediated local and global contexts. Such a framework would acknowledge members of discourse communities as agents with values, goals, interests, and activities and in relation to each member’s possible belonging to other communities, a focus which could potentially lead to progress on the challenging theoretical issue of boundaries between various types of communities. Studying newly emerging kinds of discourse communities using an ecological approach will help us develop more adequate theoretical and methodological approaches, because social media bring a number of changes in the way discourse communities emerge, communicate, and develop. By studying the new genres and new forms of social organization brought by social media, the research community will be able to better understand both traditional and newly emerging discourse communities.

**References**


