

The Pantry as a Discourse Community

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Introduction

In the article, “Understanding Discourse Communities”, Dan Melzer states that discourse community is a term used “to describe a community of people who share the same goals, the same methods of communicating, the same genres, and the same lexis (specialized language)” (p. 102). In other words, a discourse community is a group of people that work for the same purpose, use the same source for communication and share the same language specific to the community they are a part of.

During the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, several food pantries opened throughout the nation. According to the article, “Considerations for Food Pantries and Food Distribution Sites”, “Food pantries and food distribution sites provide donated food at no cost to people who have limited access...” (2021). The purpose behind every food pantry and food distribution site is to provide people with necessities and work to eliminate food insecurity especially during unprecedented times like the Covid-19 pandemic. Martinez et al. (2017), note in their paper, “Food insecurity is defined as the limited or uncertain ability to obtain nutritionally adequate food due to lack of financial resources, resulting in disrupted eating patterns and/or reduced food intake” (p. 1). Like the food pantries worldwide, the UC Davis Food Pantry is a resource that originally opened in 2010 to provide free food and necessities to UC Davis students to eliminate food insecurity on campus. Contrary to other food pantries, the UC Davis Food Pantry has a larger purpose than just helping students in the pandemic even though it was open throughout this crisis as well. In “Food Insecurity is a Critical Issue Among Many Students”, it is stated, “A 2015 study commissioned by the University of California Office of the President has reported that up to 42% of students throughout the UC system experience high levels of food insecurity; a common finding at colleges and universities across the nation.” The staff working for the UC

Davis Food Pantry realize the fact that food insecurity prevalence in college is high. Therefore, the pantry works to eliminate food insecurity.

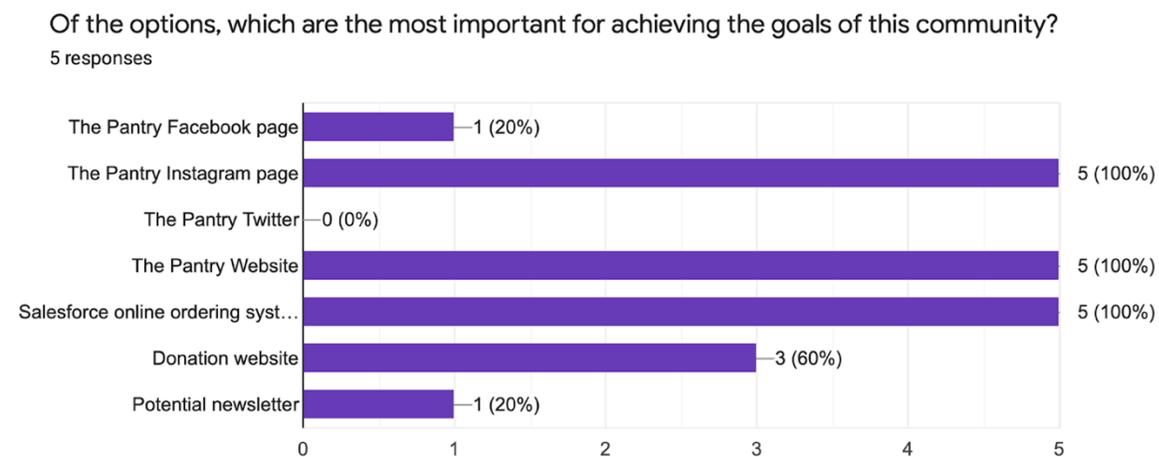
The Pantry at UC Davis is an example of a discourse community. This discourse community shares a common goal as the personal mission statement on this community's website notes, "The mission of The Pantry is to aid UC Davis students in their pursuit of higher education by ensuring that no student ever has to miss a meal or go without basic necessities due to financial reasons." This shows that the main goal for this discourse community is to get rid of food insecurity on UC Davis campus. Also, the employees of this community communicate through their emails and the Pantry shares information about upcoming events through their social media pages like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. But the Pantry also has a website that has links to a donation page and the Salesforce online ordering system to aid the students in the process of getting food. Last but not least, the employees of this community use a specialized language. On the Google survey that was conducted, one of the employees mentioned that "... we call all individuals that use the pantry patrons rather than other names despite most patrons being students" (Respondent 1). Another respondent brought up the point that they "abbreviate the names of the various Pantry teams (IM, VM, PM, etc.). We also have 'shift leads (SLs)'" (Respondent 2). All these different aspects of the Pantry make it a discourse community. As a discourse community, the Pantry uses different types of genres to increase its impact on the issue of food insecurity in UC Davis students. The use of the Salesforce online ordering system linked on the website facilitates the students' use of this discourse community as a resource, while the social media platforms inform students about the most updated information, and this increases engagement from the students.

Method

As an outsider, I had to do much more research about the general process that goes on this discourse community. After doing some preliminary research and learning about several different genres that this community uses, I decided to research more about “What are the important genres of the Pantry and how do they help this discourse community accomplish goals?” I decided to conduct my research using observation and survey. I started off by researching the Pantry on Google and found its website. Using the website, I got to know the purpose of this discourse community and different genres that are used to further this goal. After collecting data from observing the website, I created a Google survey for the employees working at the Pantry. Through this survey, I asked them general questions about the Pantry along with the most useful genres that they use and how it helps their discourse community. On the Google survey, I was only able to collect the emails of the respondent and not the names. Therefore, the respondents will be referred to using their email.

Results

Survey Results



This graph shows the responses to the question, “Of the option, which are most important for achieving goals of this community?” All the respondents chose the Pantry Instagram page, website, and the Salesforce Online Ordering System. About 60% of the respondents chose the donation website, 20% chose the Facebook page and nobody selected the Twitter page. These responses were results of the given options. There was also an “others” option, and a respondent answered a “Potential newsletter” in this section.

Interview Results

When the respondents were asked to explain their answers to the question above, respondent 1 mentioned, “The Pantry website and ordering platform are important first as they provide credibility to the pantry as well as serve as the direct link in providing patrons with pantry products.” This is important because it shows that website and the Salesforce online ordering system are the two components of this pantry that helps it function at its basics. Without these two sources, the people using the pantry would not be able to get the vital information and order any products. Adding on to the important genres, respondent 2 stated, “The Instagram provides the fastest way of getting information out to Pantry patrons.” The Pantry can use Instagram to inform students about the most updated information about the operations and about the food items that are in stock because the Instagram is probably the most common social media on campus as the research by Auxier and Anderson (2021) notes that about 71% of 18-29 years old use Instagram (p. 1).

Data Analysis

The genres used in this discourse community serve as a method to communicate with the students and aid the use of the pantry. The importance of reaching out to students and informing them about the Pantry as a resource cannot be overestimated. In view of this, the stigma attached

to the Pantry regarding its usage decrease as more students learn about it. In the article, “Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among US college students: a multi-institutional study”, the author, Zein et al. (2019) stated, “Many students refuse to use an on-campus food pantry because of the stigma attached to its use or the sense that the food pantry is not intended for them as its need implies a personal failure. Access barriers such as limited hours, regulated frequency of use, and lack of knowledge on the logistics of its use, have also been reported by the students” (para 40). This is the reason why educating students about the existence of the Pantry is crucial whether it is through the website or other social media platforms. As a way to address this issue, the Pantry’s website gives out basic information and the logistics and includes the link to the Salesforce online ordering system. Whereas the social media platforms provide students with the most updated information and with the news about any sudden operational changes.

Just like Zein notes in the article above, it would be beneficial for students to have a system where they are able to order food products anonymously without anyone knowing about it. Agreeing to the suggestion above, respondent 1 commented,

“The Instagram as well as other social media (though insta appears most accessible) is arguably the most essential component in my opinion as the pantry can only be used as a campus food resource so long as students KNOW it's a resource. Outreach and marketing of the pantry are integral in ensuring that students and other individuals on campus know that this resource is available and accessible to them. Without that component, we're just a food storage facility and not actually getting food to students in need.”

This shows that along with being able to deliver just the basic information to people through the website and providing help in the ordering process, it also significantly important to reach out to

students to tell them about the Pantry as a resource that can be used. As both the interviewee and the article have stated, more knowledge about the Pantry is the key to a better and a greater service and social media is the way to raise awareness.

The Pantry is a discourse community that tries to use all its genres to eliminate food insecurity on campus. Food insecurity does not only deprive students of nutritious foods, but it can have even greater impacts on the lives of the students and their performance in school. In the article, “No food for thought: Food insecurity is related to poor mental health and lower academic performance among students in California’s public university system”, Martinez et al. (2018) note that 3 in 10 food insecure students had an A average while about 5 in 10 students with food security had an A average. On the other hand, 19% of students suffering from food insecurity had a C average which is higher than 9% food secure students who had a C average. Adding on to the effects of food insecurity, Martinez et al. (2018) stated, “Students experiencing food insecurity had a significantly higher proportions of poor mental health indicators (22-83%) compared to student experiencing food security (11-80%)” (para. 16). There is a clear connection that not getting enough nutritious food is linked to poorer mental health and a worse academic performance. Therefore, by trying to increase the impact by using different types of genres, the Pantry is not only providing the students with more healthy and nutritious food but also offering students with a resource to improve their academic performance and their mental health.

Conclusion

With about 40 percent of the students facing food insecurity on campus, the Pantry at UC Davis works towards its goal of eliminating hunger by providing an opportunity to all students which allows them to get nutritious food for free. The Pantry communicates the basic information and provides a link to the online ordering system through the website. To provide

students with more updated information, the Pantry uses the social media platforms like Instagram that most of the students have access to. By providing free food to all, the Pantry is not only targeting food insecurity on campus but also resolves several sub issues that arise with these bigger problems. For example, with more nutritious and healthier foods, students will have a better mental and physical health. Hence, they will be able to focus more on their academics and improve their academic performance. However, this cannot happen without the social media and without raising awareness. The solution to food insecurity on the UC Davis campus is dependent on the word going around about the Pantry as a resource.

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