Kincaid Johnson
UWP 001
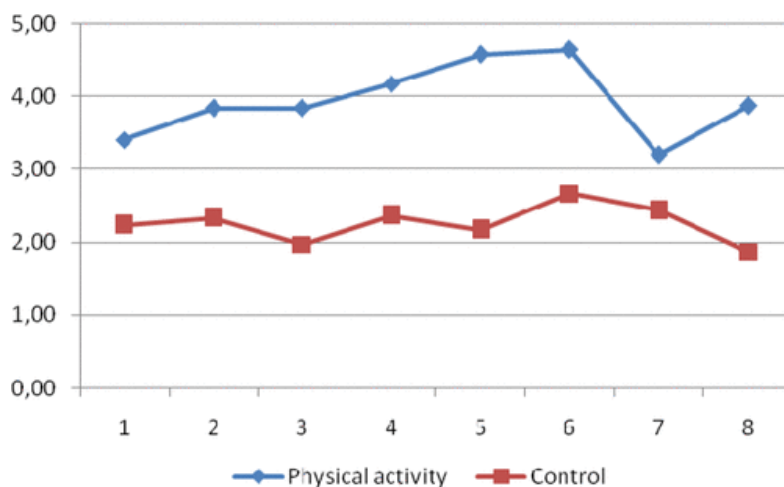Discourse Community Project
February 17, 2022

Introduction:

A discourse community refers to a group of people that share common goals, communicate in various forms, and use genre to provide feedback and methods to achieve common goals (Melzer 2020). Any group, organization, or association of people that comes to mind is a discourse community, whether that is a video game online chat or a guitar playing club at school. The discourse community I have chosen to research in this project is the Berkeley Path Wanderers Association. This community is local to Berkeley California, aiming to unite people who share a common passion in walking and the walking paths that are scattered throughout the Berkeley hills. The discourse community holds monthly walking and volunteer events, where interested individuals and current members can be social and connect with others, and also help to better the local community. Some of the group goals include improving current paths that are in poor condition and constructing infrastructure to help with the accessibility of these paths. In order to connect with the community, their website and monthly letters are vital to stay informed. Monthly newsletters include information about the organizations governing board, monthly walking and volunteer event opportunities, and educational sections aimed to improve the wellbeing of the reader. In order to understand this community, it is vital to understand the importance of community genres, which most importantly are walking events and the community website. Contrary to popular belief, genre can take form in many ways beyond the typical movie and book subject matter categorizations. As writer Kelly Dirk shares, rhetorician Bitzer states that regardless of the situation, whether writing or a courtroom discussion, "a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established" (2010). This paper aims to understand the motives behind the community's specific genres, and gather a deeper understanding of the means of communication and membership within the community.

Methods:

To understand the genre of walking events, I decided to turn to scientific research relating to exercise and cooperation. There are numerous scientific experiments that have proven the beneficial factors of exercise on mental health, but minimal conclusions on whether or not exercise can be beneficial to human interaction and cooperation. In a study done by Giovanni Bartolomeo and Stefano Papa in 2017, they studied the effects of physical activity trust, as well as the rationalization of prosocial behavior. In addition to the scientific article, I analyzed community artifacts to learn more about becoming a member of the community, and the role that reading and writing plays within group affairs. By looking at the group's important genres, it would reveal whether or not writing and reading was important for participation and communication, but also ways in which certain groups of people might be excluded from communication and community activities.

Community Formation and Cooperation:

Bartolomeo and Papa's experiment involved two groups participating in a game where participants, one of them being an investor, had to decide how much money, or amount of the ten tokens they were given, to give to another participant, who was the trustee. This amount given was multiplied by three, and the trustee must choose how much of this increased amount to allocate to the investor. As confusing as it sounds, the main goal here was to determine the amount of trust involved between the two participants as they decided to allocate money to one other. The two separate groups participated in differing 30 minute pre-experimental activities. Group one viewed nature pictures and responded in short sentences,while the other group participated in physical activity. Group A, the exercise group, sent an average of 3.94 tokens, while Group B, the control, sent an average of 2.25 tokens. Due to this data, there was a large correlation between trust, and physical activity. Those who exercise prior to the game were found to be more trusting, and

therefore allocated more tokens to the other participants. The scientists also determined that the effects of the exercise lasted through all of the experiment's 8 rounds. (As seen in the diagram below)

In every round there was a significant difference in tokens sent between those who exercised and the control. Thus, we can determine that physical activity effectively boosts an individual's trust and cooperation (Bartolomeo 2017). This can be applied to the discourse community, the Berkeley Path Wanderers Association or BPWA. As the group is formed on the premise of walking as a community and enjoying the Berkeley Paths, these walking events are a vital genre to the community. As proven in the experiment, this exercise results in better trust and cooperation, and therefore a stronger community of people. With increased amounts of prosocial behavior, group communication and teamwork is enhanced, allowing the group to function smoothly as well as set up and accomplish community goals. Community cohesion creates passionate and invested members, and the group is able to maintain ranks of volunteers to fix and construct paths. In these ways, group walks are the most vital genre within the community, promoting group goals and communication alike. For this reason there is a higher importance of verbal communication within the group, compared to both reading and writing.

Although verbal communication and group walking events remain the primary genres within the community, reading and writing each play a role as well. In the Berkeley Path Wanderers' monthly newsletter they included various pieces of information, such as "Pedestrian Safety Tips" and dates for "Winter Walks" (2022). In this writing the verbiage is simple and concise, so no previous knowledge in the specialized area is required, but reading proficiency is necessary. Additionally, the BPWA rely heavily on their website for communication. The website includes links to newsletters, featured media coverage of the group, and a community blog. A recent story "Meet Andrew Dickson, Path Builder" discusses a new member of the community, Andrew, a graduate student attending University of California Berkeley. BPWA member and author of the blog post, Colleen Neff, shares that he had never heard of the community before, but discovered it through some online searches looking for a way to stay active during the COVID-19 pandemic (2022). Through this blog, it is clear that the website plays an important role in connecting people with the community, and giving individuals opportunities to volunteer and walk with

other members. Therefore, this reveals that reading proficiency is vital to become an involved member of the community. If an individual is unable to read, there is a lack of non-written resources and news, therefore this is a very important aspect if an individual is interested in the community. Due to the fact that the verbiage used within the website and newsletters is rather concise and simple, it is not necessary to have an elevated reading skill, but rather just proficiency to understand meaning.

The blog also offers insight into the treatment of new members. As Colleen mentions, Andrew had never heard about the organization before, but got in contact with some of the leaders online. Here, writing plays a role in group communication with interested new members. One of the website sections offers various email addresses depending on which part of the community you are interested in, whether that is path building and maintenance, donating, or becoming a member of monthly walks. Once individuals have contacted the leaders of the organization they can get involved. As Colleen explains, Andrew was interested in path maintenance, which includes "weeding, sweeping, raking, and clipping", and was taught by pre-existing members within the community (Berkeley Path Wanderers, 2022). Although this is not helping new members gain proficiency in reading or writing, new members like Andrew are taught verbally in-person. Once again, it becomes clear that in person communication is the primary means of communication and teaching within the group. This also opens the door to another genre, which is path building skills. For those who are unfamiliar with this skill set, the organization can teach you how to build paths and get involved. As expressed by Colleen and seasoned path builder Bob Gomez, the younger generation is important, as they are the next wave of BPWA members. From this comment, we can also infer that the organization heavily encourages new members, whether you have previous knowledge in the field or not.

Outside Voices:

Including the voices of all becomes an important aspect of community, as community goals and values must be accepted and respected by all members. Part of the community is making sure to support those with critiques, or different opinions from your own, or the group as a whole. For this reason, having a way to communicate ideas within the community becomes important. In reference to the Berkeley Path

Wanderers Association, finding a way to provide feedback or discussion to group goals and news is difficult. After analyzing the website, exploring each and every section and tab, it became clear that emailing the leaders and governing board was the only way to communicate your thoughts. Additionally, as the community's primary genre of communication is in-person walking events, this creates an issue for those who cannot attend these affairs. In order to increase communication between online members, it is important to incorporate some sort of online chatting opportunity. This becomes increasingly important in the modern pandemic filled world, where those who are immunocompromised, or knows someone who is, must limit their contact with others. In order to adjust for those in this situation, and with the advancing use of technology in the modern world, it is important to expand community online as well. The Berkeley Path Wanderers, due to the primary age of their members, as well as their dominant genre, which includes in-person interaction, they lack the online aspect of community.

Randal Pinkett, a scholar at MIT, discussed "Bridging the Divide" between the technological world and community building (2000). Pickett believes that "individual and community development are reciprocally enhanced by independent and shared constructive activity" (2000). Furthermore, correct application of community interests through technology can lead to the positive development of sociocultural construction. One of the results of this construction is online "learning webs", adopted by Ivan Illich in the 1970s. These ideas emphasize the benefits of creating a technological community, and the benefits that can bring to the community culture and social interactions as a whole. Although, to achieve this, as Pickett discusses, the best interests of the community must be taken into account, such as the interests of those who are less represented. In the case of the discourse community, the BPWA, it is therefore important to include those who are participating from a distance, or online using their website. The genres of the community must be expanded, creating chatting spaces, and a sense of cultural and social inclusion for those who are in the virtual world. The definitions of community are expanding, incorporating developing technologies as well.

Conclusions:

The analyzed discourse community, the Berkeley Path Wanderers Association, aims to create a community for those who enjoy walking in the Berkeley hills, but also to help better the Berkeley community. The primary genres for the group are in-person walking events, and their website, which features news, blogs, and opportunities to join the community. Due to the fact that the community relies on in-person events as a main source of collaboration, reading and writing is also important to be a member of the group. Most community messages and events are shared online through emailed newsletters to members, and posted information on their website. For this reason, reading competency is required to understand and participate with the group. In reference to becoming a member of this discourse community, email is the most effective means of communication. Here, writing is an essential skill, and one must be proficient in writing to communicate and inquire about becoming a member. Although writing skills are necessary to join, once you become a member the association will teach you all necessary skills relating to the walking and trail building community genre. As the community prioritizes its time and attention to in-person events and projects, the community lacks representation online. As far as community development, technology connects people more than ever before, and it is important that everyone is included in the community, meaning it could be necessary to expand community from the in-person world, but also into the virtual world. When exploring this community and learning about the benefits of both exercise and technology in community developments, I uncovered a new challenge. In order to prevent the exclusion of voices and other parties, while keeping an in-person community, the BPWA and other organizations alike must find balance.

References:

BPWA. "BPWA January News: Meet Our New Board Members + Walking Safely in Berkeley + Jacque Update." *Marketing, Automation & Email Platform*, Berkeley Path Wanderers Association , 2022, https://mailchi.mp/berkeleypaths/bpwa-january-news-meet-our-new-board-members-walking-safely-in-berkeley-jacque-update?e=1c72bcf830.

Di Bartolomeo, Giovanni, and Stefano Papa. "The Effects of Physical Activity on Social Interactions: The Case of Trust and Trustworthiness." *Journal of Sports Economics*, vol. 20, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 50–71, doi:10.1177/1527002517717299.

Dirk, Kelly. "Navigating Genres - WAC Clearinghouse." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 1*, Colorado State University , 2010, https://wac.colostate.edu/books/writingspaces1/dirk--navigating-genres.pdf.

Melzer , Dan. "Understanding Discourse Communities - WAC Clearinghouse." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 1*, Colorado State University , 2020, https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/writingspaces3/melzer.pdf.

Paths, Berkeley, et al. "Path Stories." *Berkeley Path Wanderers Association*, BPWA , 31 Jan. 2022, https://www.berkeleypaths.org/pathstories.

Pinkett, Randal D. "Bridging the digital divide: Sociocultural constructionism and an asset-based approach to community technology and community building." *81st Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), New Orleans, LA*. 2000.