Hot Discussions in Online Grief Forums: An Exploration of the Characteristics of Long Discussion Threads in Online Grief Forums

Jessey Britt

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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In this study, I have observed that there is a disparity between the number of posts that certain threads receive in online grief forum discussions, and have examined this disparity as a possible source of information regarding the characteristics of posters. Furthermore, I have observed that those threads which receive more responses in comparison to those that received fewer Perhaps, though, I have implicitly suggested that when it comes to the sheer number of responses that a thread receives, more is better. That is, the more responses that thread receives, the more likely it is that the thread is precise to the kind of support for which she was not looking. Additionally, posters may have used the personal e-mail feature of the discussion boards in order to hold private conversations, thus possibly another cause for the discussed disparity.

In Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century, Cynthia Selfe argues that when it comes to technology use, society has two “complicated obligations: first we must try to understand—to pay attention to—how technology is essentially linked to literacy and literacy education in this country; and second we must help colleagues, students, administrators, politicians, and other Americans gain some increasingly critical and productive perspective on technological literacy” (24). Although Selfe makes her argument from the perspective of a humanities educator, her argument is equally as relevant to those in the field of technology education. In a more specific context, technology education is used is more important than what technology’s use. The grief discussion threads that I have examined in this study exemplify that, as each of the posters used the technology of the discussion board in different ways and for different purposes, thus yielding different results (thread length being one of the more visible differences).

Additionally, Selfe defines technological literacy as a “complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills in operating and interacting linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including communication, task performance, information processing, and self-expression” (24). Furthermore, Selfe states that “technology education is about harnessing the power of technology to help people engage with the world in new ways. It is about empowering people to become technologically literate, knowledgeable, and literate in the digital age. It is about understanding how technology can be integrated into the classroom and the world, and how it can be used to improve one’s quality of life.”

For those threads that required more longevity, the space operated somewhat like a passionate affinity space as griefers sought and found a number of “weak ties” with whom they could affiliate themselves and conglomerate for a similar purpose. In Language and Learning in the Digital Age, James Paul Gee and Elizabeth R. Hayes explain that “people with whom we have weak ties are not close to us and not likely to be in need of us. They use us as a resource but are not close to us. These are people who we share less knowledge and background. Such people are likely more comfortable sharing information that we do not already know and give us new or true information” (35). They continue to explain that “in fast-changing and unpredictable times, weak ties are crucial. Thanks to digital media, everyone in the digitally connected parts of the world, news lives next to one another. People can be strangers and intimates at the same time” (36). Because of the nature of technology education’s growing circumstances, the discussion boards allowed people in similar situations (in this case, having recently lost a spouse) to connect with each other and share resources with one another. In this sense, the phenomenon shows exactly this aspect of Gee’s and Hayes’s argument. The thread participants, although they did not know each other at all (as some of them were from different parts of the Internet, some from the U.S., while one of her responders was from the U.K., and yet another from Australia), were able to form intimate bonds with one another by sharing resources and experiences. In some cases, this sharing led even to the creation of new knowledge as people converged and suggested new and original coping ideas that were relevant to their situation, as the poster Anna (who adopted the abused dog, Mia) did in Bluebird’s thread.

While this study does not necessarily address the characteristics that are inherent in online grief discussion boards (as no study ever could), it does explore one aspect of them. This particular interdisciplinary lens, which examines various ways in which griefers use the technology, might help psychologists re-frame studies that attempt to monolithically gauge the effectiveness of such discussion forums or other uses of technology for the purpose of grief expression and coping.