

Going The Distance: Cohesion's Relationship to Discourse Communities Introduction

KATIE CHAPMAN
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Individual sports are sports that don't require a team. Athletes in these sports can compete on their own without a team, but can also choose to participate as a team member to contribute to an overall score. Although one competes individually, recent studies suggest that individual sports teams have many qualities of a discourse community, if athletes practice with a team. Successful individual sports teams have a set of goals (Cormier, 2015; Evans, M.B., 2014), experienced members (Cormier, 2015), and a horizon of expectations along with ways to integrate newcomers into the pattern (Colman, 2001; Milbrath, 2016).

M.B. Evans supports the need for goals by looking at how shared goals related to the level of interdependence on the team. He found that individual sports teams with shared tasks or goals that required teammates to work together during competitions were more dependent on each other. For example, on a cross country team, working together in competition would look like two or more teammates staying with each other

for most or the entirety of the race. Evans also found that when individual sports teams were more dependent on each other, their ability to work together as a team increased. So, by having one goal (competing in a race), a team can be more cohesive. In this paper, I define the word “cohesive” with Eduardo Salas's definition: “the shared bond/attraction that drives team members to stay together and to want to work together” (Salas, 2015, 1).

Marc Cormier supports the idea of needing experienced members also through the idea of cohesion. By interviewing successful coaches of individual sports teams, he was able to find that it was up to the coaches to appoint effective team leaders (most likely experienced members who know the expectations), and up to the team leaders to enforce a positive environment. If a coach doesn't have effective team leaders, then the team cannot work together. However, if a coach recruits team leaders that make a point to help integrate newcomers, create personal goals on the team, and maintain a positive atmosphere, a cohesive team is more likely to form.

Luc Martin's “Coach Perspective of Groups Within the Group: An Analysis of Subgroups and Cliques in Sport,” reads as a response to Cormier's argument about the role of coaches. Cormier argued it was up to the coaches to appoint people who can maintain a cohesive environment, while Martin brought the idea that it was up to the coaches to keep an eye on groups that form. Teams can get complicated, as groups naturally form within the team. Some people just click with other people more than others; however, sometimes the groups that form can bring exclusive energy to the team. This decreases unity, as there is a group that doesn't seem to be accepting other members of the team, taking away the attraction/bond that's necessary for cohesion.

Martin argues it is up to the coach to keep an eye on those groups and ensure all subgroups on the team are encouraging a cohesive environment.

While the conversation so far has only covered three of the criteria essential to a discourse community, no research appears to exist on how other features of a discourse community, such as genre, lexis, or silential expectations, function on an individual sports team (Swales, 1987; Swales, 2016). Any cohesive group has forms for communication. How are they supposed to be on the same page and have a bond that drives them to work together if they never hear anything from that group? There are also certain shorthand languages a close-knit group may have that no one from outside would really understand. I believe that a cohesive community would naturally meet the qualifications of a discourse community as well. After all, how many discourse communities have been studied that don't seem to have a bond that drives them to work together? Every discourse community needs to have some aspect that draws the community together, even in communities of a single individual sports team such as cross country.

In this paper, I argue that the Western Oregon University (WOU) men and women's cross-country team is one discourse community. I will also argue through this that a sense of cohesion could be added to Swale's list of discourse community requirements. Throughout this paper, I will cover survey results from both the athletes and the coaches on the team. There will be a discussion on what elements of the cross-country team hold it together even with the decisions that arise in race times, training, and races. The results will also discover the coach's influences in providing a positive environment for

the team to acquire cohesiveness, as well as if the athletes and coaches on the WOU cross country team perceive the team as cohesive.

Methods

While researching individual sports teams and cross-country teams, I decided to seek more broad information on the cross-country teams at WOU. Since I wanted to learn how the team functioned and how athletes and coaches perceived the team was held together, I knew observations would be too biased. Not everyone has the same experiences or values as I do on the team, so it was important I got everyone's opinion. However, since I was just looking for themes of how the team felt, I used surveys to gather the team's opinion on how they saw the WOU cross country team. I sent the survey out to the coaches and athletes directly, as they're the ones involved and would be able to give me the information I was looking for.

I sent out two different surveys: one to the athletes and one to the coaches. I received ten out of thirty-one responses from the athletes, and two out of three responses from the coaches. I will refer to the coaches as Coach A and Coach B to keep them anonymous. Before I surveyed the coaches, I waited for the athletes' responses to come back. This allowed me to tailor the survey to my coaches based on the athletes' responses. Although most questions between the surveys were very similar, the language between the two was different. Since the coaches were more experienced and more likely to read any background information for my survey, I told them a bit more. By defining the term "cohesive" for them, I was able to create questions that seemed more specific to what I was wanting to know.

From the secondary research, I had discovered that a successful team was cohesive, and therefore had many qualities of a discourse community. I will be able to use my results from the survey to first analyze if team members feel we are cohesive, and then second what genres or conventions of the WOU cross country team keep us together as one discourse community.

Results & Discussion

Within the results, many themes of a discourse community were evident. The themes that were brought up between both groups include a common goal, intercommunication, use of multiple (unique) genres, lexis, and leadership. The two figures below represent the responses from athletes (Figure 1) and coaches (Figure 2) on the elements that keep the team cohesive. This data showed to be the most beneficial in connecting cohesiveness to discourse communities.

Figure 1: Responses from Athletes

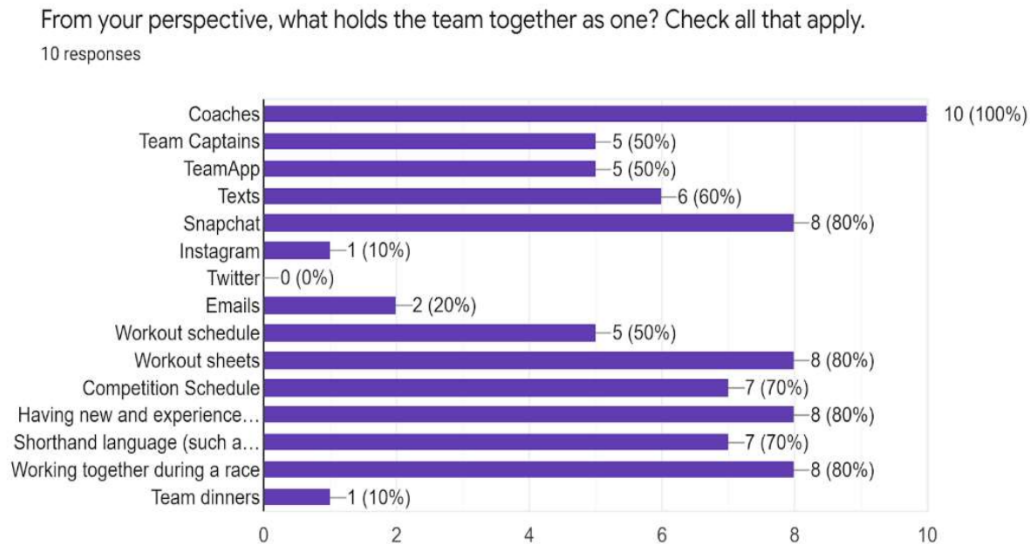


Figure 2: Responses from Coaches

From your perspective as coaches, what helps keep the team cohesive and close with each other?
 Check all that apply
 2 responses



Common Goal

Through the survey, I found the shared common goal revolved around scoring for both the athletes and the coaches. When answering the first question of “if and why they saw the WOU cross country team as a team,” 70% of the athletes mentioned common goal, scoring, and/or winning, while both coaches mentioned common goal or score. The athletes and the coach who mentioned a common goal said nothing about scoring, while the athletes and the coach who mentioned scoring/winning said nothing about a common goal. It was interesting to see that the same pattern showed up in both the athletes' and the coaches' responses, but scoring is just another way to think of a common goal.

To understand how a score and a common goal are linked, it's important to know how cross country works as a team. The goal of competing at a cross country meet is to get as low of a score as possible. Cross country races are scored by the top five runners:

each runner on the team scores the same number of points as the place they finish. For example, if WOU's first runner placed 5th overall in the race, they would score five points for the team; and, if the second runner got 15th place, they would score 15 points for the team, and so on. The team with the lowest score wins. Although only the top five runners score, a team of seven is considered a full team. The two extra runners are there in case one of the top five runners can't finish the race, or one of them has a bad day and doesn't race well. The sixth or seventh runner, in that case, could still get points for the team, since teams cannot score with less than five runners finishing.

So even though the people who mentioned goals didn't mention scoring, and the people who mentioned scoring didn't mention goals, we can say they are linked. To get a good team score means it must be everyone's goal. The goal of achieving a good score is the shared bond that's driving the team members to stay together and to want to work together.

Intercommunication

By looking at Figure 1 and Figure 2 above, it is evident how intercommunication is different between the athletes and coaches. The athletes selected TeamApp, Snapchat, and Texts as ways the team is held together, while the coaches' survey only had TeamApp selected by Coach B. TeamApp is an app used in many sports that can include athletes, coaches, and officials. For WOU's cross-country team specifically, there is a group labeled "distance group chat" in TeamApp, so that all members of cross-country can communicate with each other when necessary. As Coach B explained when asked why they chose what they did, TeamApp was a "game changer" from an organizational

standpoint. Coach B explained that they had been involved with the team before the use of TeamApp. The organizational standpoint being talked about in their comment means that TeamApp helped immensely with communicating about practices, meet information, any changes that people needed to be informed of, and any other information that was important for the whole team to know. That coach was the only one who selected TeamApp, which I found interesting from my point of view as Coach B is a volunteer assistant. Coach B rarely sends anything on TeamApp, and mostly just uses it to keep track of what is going on so they can make decisions on when they can come help with practices. Coach A, however, is the distance coach and sends messages through TeamApp almost every day. They send everything on TeamApp such as what the workout is for the day, meet information, or any other organizational message. I have also heard Coach A ask athletes if they had checked TeamApp after asking a question that was already answered on TeamApp. Coach A seems to rely on TeamApp for many forms of communication; however, they only selected options that had to do directly with the members on the team, such as coaches, team captains, team dinners, etc. So, it's possible Coach A was thinking about a more physical sense of cohesion with my survey question. Athletes rarely send messages through TeamApp, which explains why only 50% of athletes chose TeamApp even though most athletes do read the messages sent out. It isn't always easy to be able to relate communicative factors one doesn't directly use as something that helps hold the team together. Regardless, TeamApp is extremely important to the communicative factors of the team. It helps communicate that shared

bond (goal) of cohesiveness as well as give information on when to show up so athletes and other coaches can show up together, ready to work together.

Snapchat was only selected by athletes, but it was selected by 80% of athletes. When asked why it was selected, one athlete responded with it “come(s) down to the more interpersonal pieces of the team [that] we as members of the team are responsible for on our own. These factors are what play a role in team building because we choose to use them to our advantage, not because the coaches/admin told us to. They allow us to bond outside of practice times as well.” Snapchat is not used from athlete to coach, but only from athlete to athlete. This allows for exactly what that athlete said: a chance to bond without someone overseeing it, or someone forcing us to bond. It’s a natural way we as teammates can get to know each other and learn how each other works. Part of being able to work together as a cohesive team means being able to know each other. There can be a shared bond of scoring, but with no true connections on the team or outside bonding time, it’s a lot harder to work together in practices and meets.

Text messages were selected by 60% of the athletes, but neither coach selected it. When creating the survey, I chose to put texts as an option because I found it was the main way I talked to my coach one-on-one. However, when asked to explain their answer to question two, I was given a very similar answer to Snapchat. Texting helps people communicate with teammates and lets athletes’ bond over the “dumbest things.” In this sense, texts contribute to a cohesive environment the same way Snapchat does. The way I was thinking about texts when I decided to put it on the survey would help with communication, but not cohesiveness since it only involves one-on-one communication.

However, thinking of texts as having the same purpose as Snapchat, texts do help with cohesiveness. Texting gave me a way to learn more about my teammates before I met them. During summer, the team captains created a group chat over text that included all the women. I was able to use this chat to ask questions, as well as learn which freshmen were also looking for a roommate. Because I was able to get to know my teammates well over text, there was already a sense of cohesion. I felt a bond/attraction that made me excited to work together with the team in the fall even though I had never met anyone in person.

Unique Genres

In Swale's 2016 article, he identifies discourse communities as having genres that aren't "owned" by anyone else, and instead are only used by the discourse community (Swales, 2016, 9-10). From the athletes' survey, 50% said workout schedules help, 80% selected workout sheets, and 70% thought competition schedules help keep the team together. On the coaches' survey, neither coach selected any of those genres as something that helps keep the team cohesive. Interviews would be necessary to discern why that is, as the coaches are the ones that use and create those genres. Because of that, it intrigues me why most athletes thought those three unique genres help keep the team together, but the coaches do not. One speculation could be the coaches already know the information they send out through those platforms, so they might not think about it as something that connects the athletes.

For the most part, the workout schedule and competition schedule are the same for the whole team. The workout schedule for the team is as follows: Sunday, long run;

Monday and Wednesday, easy/recovery run days; Thursday and Saturday, no practice; Tuesday and Friday, workout and weights. Reasons why this schedule changes are different from day to day, and can be due to many causes such as meets, sick coaches, injuries, weather, etc. Competition schedules include most people, except in the cases of travel, the last two meets of the season, or competition level within the meet. In the cases that affect everyone, any changes in the workout schedule or competition schedule are communicated through TeamApp and practice. This ensures everyone is told at least once, and helps people stay together. Giving people information that affects the schedules is important for keeping everyone connected and ready for practice and meets. On the same note, having a consistent workout schedule athletes can depend on is also important to keeping athletes motivated and drawn to showing up and working with fellow teammates. When asked why the athletes picked these genres, a common explanation was that these genres helped organize the team. Without organization, athletes wouldn't know what meets to show up for or what days to expect a workout. The different schedules for the WOU cross country team helps keep the team cohesive in this sense. They provide the team with expectations of times and places to show up to various events, holding everyone accountable to each other.

Workout sheets got the strongest response to keeping the team together. When asked why, one athlete explained that "workout sheets give us all the ability to see what we are all doing for the day and from then jokes can be made about how the workout will kill us, etc, it gives us something to relate/bond over." Workout sheets are what the distance coach hands out at practice in physical papers, and sends a picture of in

TeamApp before practice. These sheets have the workout or the run for the different training groups. On workout days, sometimes the athletes look at the paper and immediately want to give it back to the distance coach. These are the times that athletes are talking about. Not only can the team prepare to suffer together, but they can also create inside jokes about the workout coming up. Athletes can also find their training group and ask them what they think. I personally have started many conversations with girls I usually wouldn't know how to start conversations with all because of the workout sheet. Overtime, I have gotten more comfortable approaching teammates because of those smaller conversations I was able to start with them. That specific role workout sheets have on the team is not noticed by coaches, which is a possible reason why workout sheets were not selected by either coach as something that keeps the team cohesive. However, based on the athletes' responses, the sheets give a sense of closeness to teammates and lighten the mood, which ultimately helps athletes be ready to work together for a common goal.

Lexis

Having a specialized language showed up in 70% of the athletes' responses to question two, but neither of the coaches. The specialized language is used by everyone, but most often seen on the workout sheets. Terms used by the WOU cross country team can be as simple as: "the 4," which means "the 400 meter run," or as complex as: "2 sets of 3xbroken 600 35/40/35 jog 100" which means run three 600 meters with the first 200 meters at 35 seconds, the second 200 meters at 40 seconds, and the third 200 meters at 35 seconds, jog 100 meters between each 600 meters, and after three 600s, take a

couple minute break before repeating it. Instead of having to give that big explanation every time, the coach can simply just say the shorthand for it and save his and his athletes' time. Not only is the language efficient, but it creates a feeling of community. Freshman coming onto the team must ask many questions regarding the language, but once they feel fluent, some feel a sense of comfortability on the team. This is due to the expertise they were able to build. It's one physical thing freshman/newcomers can use to tell themselves that they really belong on the team. Being comfortable and having a sense of belonging is essential to cohesiveness; how are athletes supposed to create a bond with teammates so they can work together if they don't feel like they belong?

Leadership/Experienced Members

Coaches are the biggest form of leadership within the WOU cross country team, and according to 100% of athletes and 50% of coaches to take the survey, they hold the team together. Coaches are responsible for recruiting new members and are the ultimate judge in deciding if a recruit's personality and performance would mesh well with the team. They are also responsible for handling cases that require an athlete be kicked out of the program. Not every athlete is right for every program, and that is what the coaches have to decide when meeting with a recruit. In this sense, Luc Martin's article is reinforced. Coaches have to make sure the athletes they recruit have a positive and determined mindset, and they also have to be able to handle an athlete if they are starting to bring others down and create space between other athletes. Without coaches, there would be no set way of "entry and advancement management" within the team (Swales, 2016, 10). Coaches are also responsible for appointing team captains. Team

captains help hold the team together, according to both coaches and 50% of athletes. On the WOU cross country team, the coaches can only see so much, so they have to appoint people they trust to go to them if something happens on the team. The coaches need team captains who will advocate for their team and keep facilitating a positive, cohesive environment that they worked hard to create.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that the WOU cross-country team is not only a discourse community but is also cohesive. I set out to argue that cohesiveness could be added to Swale's list of requirements for a discourse community, and through that found many aspects of cohesion that line up with the already established list of discourse community characteristics. When given a survey, athletes chose or mentioned five out of eight aspects that connect to discourse community, such as a common goal, intercommunication, use of genres unique to the team, lexis, and a form of leadership. Through these results, I believe I have found very strong evidence of cohesion being related to discourse communities.

The findings of this study have added on to many past studies. There have been recent studies about how individual sport teams must be cohesive, with many points of discourse community requirements listed in the article, but no article to my knowledge has directly connected discourse communities and individual sports teams. It also strengthens Swale's idea that the idea of discourse communities has been too static, and there is more that could be added to our understanding of them (Swales, 2016, 5). Swales mentioned in that article that he was happy the conversation was still going, but also

disappointed to see hardly anything had changed about discourse community criteria. After my study, I am confident that he was indeed right, and there are still things that could be added to the list.

Though I have made a move to include cohesiveness as a criterion for discourse communities, many more studies need to take place before that decision is made. While analyzing my results, I realized many weak aspects of my survey, as well as points I just blatantly forgot about. For example, I had teammates and coaches choose from a list whatever they thought held the team together, then asked them to explain why they chose what they did. That “why” question didn’t get the response I needed or wanted out of it, as it was too broad. I shouldn’t have expected participants to explain every single option they chose in one question, and instead should have found a way to split it up into multiple questions or took the time to conduct interviews. Because of that, many results I came across were left to me and my experiences on the team to try to understand why participants chose, or didn’t choose, what they did. Future studies on this topic should aim to send out surveys, as well as interview two or more people from each “level” of the team: for example, two freshman, two team captains, two coaches, and two people from the middle of the team who have been there a while but not long enough to be an “expert.” The interviews could act as follow up questions to the survey and will be able to gather their full stories/experiences of being on the team. In the survey, I also failed to ask any questions about how feedback is given, any silential expectations, as well as anything about a horizon of expectations. Because of that, it is impossible for me to

agree or disagree with the original purpose of this article, or to even make an argument that I discovered this team worked as a discourse community.

Cohesion is also a tricky word to put in a list of requirements. There are many of the same requirements for cohesion as there are for a discourse community, and it is a broad term that needs to be defined. At what point is a term too broad to be included in a list? If we do put cohesion as a discourse community requirement, how do we measure it? From my study and past studies, it seems like cohesion is measured by looking at forms of communications, common goals, lexis, leaders, expected routines, etc. So, what *really* separates cohesion from a discourse community? This raises additional questions. For example, what happens when a community has all eight of Swale's requirements, but even with the common goal there is no drive to work together, or even with all the communication and routines, everyone is in it for themselves, and even with unique genres it might seem as if only the leaders use them? What if even with all eight criteria, there are no friendships, and no one cares who enters or leaves the discourse community? This is where more research is needed.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions to Athletes

Description of Survey: When answering questions, think of "the team" as both men and women's team combined. For my WR122 class I am analyzing how the WOU XC team as a whole functions.

Questions:

1. Cross country is considered an individual sport. Do you view the WOU's cross country team (men and women combined) as a team? Why?
2. From your perspective, what holds the team together as one? Check all that apply.
3. Explain your answer to question 2. Why does what you selected help keep the team together?
4. What, if anything, makes the cross country team (men and women combined) feel less like a team? Check all that apply
5. Explain your answer to question 4. Why does what you selected/said make the team feel less like one whole team?
6. What attracts and makes you want to stay a member of the WOU cross country team, if anything? Why?
7. Is there anything else about how the men and women's team functions you'd like to share?

Appendix B

Survey Questions to Coaches

Description of Survey: For my WR 122 class I am analyzing how the cross country team works together as a cohesive community. I define cohesive as “the shared bond/attraction that drives team members to stay together and to want to work together.” More specifically, I'm trying to determine what elements hold the team together. When I refer to "the team" I am referring to the cross country team as a whole, so men and women teams combined.

Questions:

1. Cross country is considered an individual sport. Do you view the WOU cross country team (men and women) as a cohesive team despite being "individual"? Why or why not?
2. From your perspective as coaches, what helps keep the team cohesive and close with each other? Check all that apply
3. Explain your answer to question 2. Why does what you selected help keep the team cohesive?
4. Based off what you selected in question 2, what aspects are the athletes responsible for and what ones are your responsibility? Which one's are a shared responsibility between all the coaches and the athletes?
5. What, if anything, would make the cross country team (men and women combined) feel less cohesive? Check all that apply
6. Explain your answer to 4. Why would what you selected make the team feel less cohesive?
7. From your perspective, does the WOU XC team currently struggle with any of the things you selected in question 4?
8. If you said "yes" in the previous question, explain. Why does it make the team feel less cohesive, and can you see a clear fix for it?
9. What bond/attraction drives you to want to stay and work together with the team? This can include coworkers and other coaches.
10. Is there anything else about how the teams function together that you'd like to share?

Author Bio

Katie Chapman is a freshman at Western Oregon University and runs for their cross country and track teams. She is studying exercise science and plans on getting a minor in both psychology and gerontology. After graduation, she plans to apply to physical therapy school to become a neurological physical therapist.