

Shaping the Metaphor of Community in Online Learning Environments

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The word “community” has such resonance—is it any surprise that educators have embraced it as a metaphor for the kinds of learning environments we hope to develop online? But using the metaphor of community to understand online learning environments has the classical problem of all metaphors. First of all, it is indistinct—a farrago of ideas that can lend as much confusion as clarity. Even good metaphors, unless tethered, add little to our understanding. Second, all metaphors are limited. At some point, they fall apart, and we are left with the task of discarding the metaphor and making a lunging transition to the original concept. Good metaphors permit deeper associations than poor ones, but all metaphors are shallow when compared to their referent ideas.

Despite the inherent limitations of metaphors, the metaphor of community appears to be a good one, because it gives us an accessible way to think about the baffling array of online learning environments. We can use the notion of community to discuss richer, deeper, more complex types of interplay among learners than we can by labeling such exchanges as interaction—an impoverished label for something that is potentially more profound. The language of community offers one way of thinking about the type of engagement that happens when groups of learners use technology to engage each other (Cobb, 1996; Foster, 1996; Jones, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1996). The metaphor of community has been used to describe a wide range of contexts, from communities of practice in the corporate world (Godz, 1995; Wenger, 1998) to virtual community networks (Brook & Boal, 1995; Cohill, 1997; Horn, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996).

Whither Virtual Learning Communities?

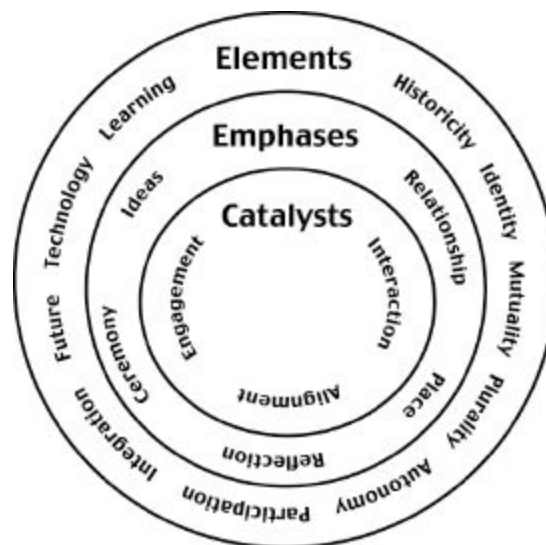
First of all, a virtual learning community is a particular type of virtual learning environment. Virtual learning environments happen when the process of learning takes place outside the boundaries of face-to-face contact, typically online. But environments are not necessarily communities. For a community to emerge, a learning environment must allow learners to engage each other intentionally and collectively in the transaction or transformation of knowledge. It isn't enough that material is presented to people and they interact with the instruction. It isn't enough that the learners interact with instructors to refine their understanding of material.

Instead, for a virtual learning community to exist, it is necessary for individuals to take advantage of, and in some cases invent, a process for engaging ideas, negotiating meaning and learning collectively. This is a definition that embraces a social constructivist interpretation of learning, and it resulted in a model of virtual learning communities developed in earlier works (Kowch & Schwier, 1997; Schwier, 2001; Schwier, in press).

All of this sounds so pleasant. Communities are idealized in our minds, but often quite different in gritty experience. We think of communities as warm, inviting and supportive; the truth is often less favourable. Few of us actually experienced the idealized community we imagine, yet we have little trouble extending the idealized version of our metaphor to virtual learning communities. We assume that learners will want to come together, that they will be mutually supportive, and they will be driven to learn. But it is important to realize that communities, and particularly virtual learning communities, are not inherently good, desirable or ideal. Sometimes learners aren't motivated, they aren't always mutually supportive and naturally collaborative, and they don't always bring the highest standards of mature conduct into their virtual learning environments. In other words, virtual learning environments don't always evolve into virtual learning communities.

Selznik (1996) identified seven important elements of communities: history, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation, and integration. For virtual learning communities, I have added three elements to Selznik's list: an orientation to the future, technology, and learning. These ten elements (see Figure 1) underscore the idea that communities are complex and multidimensional, and each element carries corresponding implications for supporting learning in virtual contexts.

Figure 1. Elements, emphases and catalysts of virtual learning communities (Schwier, 2001).



The model also describes various emphases that can exist or co-exist in virtual learning communities. VLCs might emphasize building interpersonal relationships, mimic a geographic location, provide a place for reflection, provide a gathering place for ceremony or ritual, or emphasize sharing ideas. None of these emphases are exclusive; most virtual learning communities have more than one emphasis.

The center feature of the model of virtual learning communities, labeled “catalysts,” emphasizes the fundamental importance of communication to virtual communities (figure 1). Communication is the brick and mortar of virtual communities, and communities only exist as long as communication is available to participants. Communication among participants results in interaction, engagement and ultimately some measure of alignment with shared values of the community (Wenger, 1998).

Building or Growing Virtual Learning Communities

Virtual learning communities do not just happen; but neither are they created—at least not exactly. What we are attempting to do as educators is promote the development of virtual learning communities by nurturing the conditions under which they can arise. We can try to seduce learners to become involved, but ultimately it is the learners who will determine whether a virtual learning community emerges. Learners have control over the quality of collaboration that happens online, and if they reject the invitation to elevate their engagement with each other, we will be left with something less—a cohort, not a community (Misanchuk, Anderson, Craner, Eddy and Smith, 2000).

Still, there is much that can be done to support the components of VLCs. An important over-arching principle to building a virtual learning community is to be deliberate, to think about and do things purposefully to foster community growth. Certainly, by considering each of the elements of community, we can derive instructional strategies that are consistent with the elements (see Table 1).

Bryce-Davis (2001) identified five critical features for building virtual learning communities: rules, roles, rounds, rituals and ringers. Rules and roles are transparent. Learning communities require the establishment of rules to govern the operation of the community and articulate protocols for engagement with others. How restrictive the rules of engagement are will probably significantly influence the Roles help define the activities carried out in learning communities and set out expectations for participation. The notions of rounds, ringers and rituals are particularly important, it seems, for learning environments.

Rounds are the iterations of events. In a course, for example, it might be useful to set up several events that follow a common pattern, and because there are “rounds” of communication, it permits participants to develop skill and comfort with this type of interaction. Certainly, we found with courses we have operated, that participants required several events before they learned how to perform successfully in online learning events (Schwier & Balbar, in press; Dykes & Schwier, 2002). In effect, by using several rounds of events in online learning communities, it allows time for rituals to be developed and used. Rituals can be thought of as the routines in learning communities, and they can be as simple as the way people are greeted when they enter a virtual space or as complex as a set of procedures for moderating a planned event.

Table 1. Implications of community elements for online learning strategies (adapted from Schwier, in press).

Elements of Community	Implications for Virtual Learning Communities
Historicity. Shared history and culture strengthens community bonds.	Incorporate what members have done in the past, and make their stories part of the community culture. Mention the culture, value and context of the virtual community. Make public the history of the community.
Identity. Successful virtual learning communities need to have boundaries — an identity or recognized focus.	Use team -building exercises, develop community logos, and publicly acknowledge accomplishments by the group and individual members within the community. Articulate the focus or purpose of the community, and outline the requirements and rituals accompanying membership in the community.
Mutuality. Communities spring from, and are maintained by interdependence and reciprocity among members.	Include group exercises, assignments, activities that require each member to contribute to the final product. Ask leading questions that encourage members of the community to invest in concerns held by other members, and to share ideas and possible solutions.
Plurality. Communities draw much of their vitality from intermediate associations (e.g., families, churches, school groups, athletic teams).	Encourage membership and participation from and association with groups related to the learning focus. These might include businesses, professional associations, or groups in other countries exploring similar issues.
Autonomy. Strong communities respect and protect individual identity.	Foster individual expression and comment explicitly on its value. Set up protocol for respectful communication and reach consensus in the group. Create strategies for settling disputes or inappropriate behavior.
Participation. Social interaction, especially participation that promotes self-determination, respects the autonomy of members and sustains the community.	Allow members of the group to shape learning agendas. Give guidance to new community members, and promote opportunities for established members to go outside the boundaries of the learning event or focus. Encourage lurkers and spectators to engage others.
Future. Learning communities are not static; they create movement in a direction. Learning communities "open trajectories of participation that place engagement in its practice in the context of a valued future." (Wenger, 1998, p.215).	Identify the direction of learning. Ask participants to describe ways they will use what they have learned in the community in the future. Conduct "visioning" exercises to determine new initiatives to be undertaken by the community.
Technology. Technology facilitates virtual learning communities, but may also inhibit their growth. Technology provides a conduit for discourse among participants. At the same time, technology can be a barrier to communication and can exclude some people from the community who cannot afford or use communications technology.	Employ technology that allows meaningful communication, and which is easy for participants to use. Promote communication approaches that are compatible with older, less costly equipment where communities intend to be inclusive.
Learning. Learning is a central element of virtual learning communities, although the nature of the learning can be broadly defined and contextual.	Remind participants of learning intentions, and intervene when interaction drifts too far away from the learning focus. Encourage individuals on the periphery of the community to contribute their tacit knowledge to the explicit knowledge of the community.
Integration. Elements of community are integrated. They depend on supportive norms, beliefs and practices. Elements should be complementary.	Articulate a set of belief statements, and identify group norms as they evolve. Adopt and firmly adhere to a learner-centered philosophy, and employ pedagogy that supports individual expression while building a group identity.

But my favourite of Bryce-Davis' features is "ringers." Ringers are the surprise events, the small rocks tossed into the glassy surface of smoothly operating community discourse. For example, a surprise guest in a chat room can be a ringer, as can a contentious statement from a participant. A new or unusual activity can also disrupt the established patterns and expectations just enough to renew interest. Ringers can be planned or serendipitous, but in either case, they keep a virtual community awake.

It is reasonable to think of learning communities as having a life, one that goes through fairly predictable stages. Misanchuk, Anderson, Craner, Eddy and Smith (2000) suggest that learning communities evolve from simple cohorts by employing "increasing levels of student interaction and commitment" (p.1). In learning communities, this interaction is characterized by different ways of working together, and students move through discussion to cooperation and collaboration as the learning community emerges

The formative stage in the life of a virtual learning community is characterized by the attraction of new members. During the formative stage, the identity of the community is malleable, and participants are typically somewhat tentative as they try out communicating and making connections with other community members. A mature stage of life in the virtual community is ultimately achieved once the purpose, shape and operation of the community are settled. At this point the leader doesn't have to play as central a role in negotiating the purpose and monitoring the activities of members. And ultimately, most virtual communities will be challenged to undertake a metamorphosis and become a new entity with a focus that is different from the original conception of what the virtual learning community would become. As a virtual learning community passes through these various stages, it is reasonable to expect that the strategies appropriate for intentionally using them for learning will also change.

Social Capital in Virtual Learning Communities

Collectively, the tangible and intangible assets that can be derived from virtual networks of people are referred to as "social capital." At the most fundamental level, virtual learning communities are structures built on relationships, and there is value that accrues to individuals from the relationships. This value might be evidenced in tangible cognitive assets such as knowledge or in many intangible forms such as emotional support, encouragement or norms governing interaction. Cohen and Prusak (2001) suggest that social capital includes mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours—the stock of things that holds people together as members of human networks and communities and make co-operative action possible.

Daniel (2002) argues that trust is the most fundamental value residing in social capital. It is the glue that makes legitimate interaction possible among community members, and without it, there is little possibility that participants will receive or invest social capital. I would argue that trust is somewhat easier to build in formal community structures, such as online courses, than it is in informal community structures, such as un-moderated, volunteer chat groups. This is because someone such as an instructor or moderator, who knows the identities of the participants, typically moderates formal structures. Another

reason is that formal structures such as courses also impose the specter of evaluation, thus encouraging members to participate in a serious, if not genuine, manner. Of course, nothing can stop a participant from being disingenuous, but participants in formal structures are more likely to realize that there are consequences attached to their actions. This, in turn, promotes the trustworthiness of interactions, and the likelihood that social capital will be generated.

Summary

In conclusion, it is apparent that the metaphor of community, once unpacked, does shed some light on the shape of online learning communities. Communities have features that suggest strategies we can use to nurture student collaboration and learning. Furthermore, the metaphor links naturally with a social constructivist epistemology, and it invites us to consider interesting constructs such as social capital as we attempt to understand how people operate in virtual learning environments.

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Note: Portions of this paper are drawn from previous writings in Schwier (2001) and Schwier (in press).

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