In praise of community: the case for consensus seeking within online networks

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Abstract

This paper considers the idea of community in networked learning. Community is a contested concept both in terms of definition and in the ways in which we perceive the consequences of belonging to communities. While community is generally valued this has not always been the case. One particularly compelling example of a critique of online community was offered by Hodgson & Reynolds (2005). This critique was underpinned by three key arguments: we read technology naively; community is uncritically 'privileged'; we overstate the importance of consensus. These three propositions are analysed in detail. First, there is considerable support for the idea that we have an overly determinist view of technology with, for example, some literature routinely shifting from statements as to what technology *can* do to statements as to how technology is *likely* to be used. This is naïve as in practice technology use is likely to be differentiated and shaped by wider social cultural factors. Second, while there is some support for the idea that community is privileged, there is always a balance to be made between the *opportunities* provided by community (for example enabling a social life and building a social identity) with the constraints of community (for example, a bias towards conformity and suppression of counter cultural thinking). Third, there is, again, support for the idea that consensus can be forced and that it may be more desirable for learners to explore positions in counter-cultural sub groups, or to strike looser forms of association, rather than experience the tensions and restrictions of community membership. However, the paper resists the conclusion that the search for community and consensus in itself is misplaced. Instead it is suggested we should not give up on a big idea about learning – that is learning involves the public airing of difference and reaching an accommodation with others by the force of the stronger argument. It is argued the search for consensus within what we might recognise as an ideal speech community remains a valuable educational aim.

Keywords

Online communities, ideal speech, consensus, technological determinism

Introduction

The term community is often introduced in definitions of networked learning (e.g. Goodyear et al. 2004:4) and frequently evoked more widely in work on civic networks and citizenship (e.g. Price, 2009; Schuler, 1996; Tambini, 1999); informal learning (Norris, 2002; Paulini, Maher, & Murty, 2014); and formal teaching and learning (e.g. Preece & Maloney- Krichmar, 2005). However community is not a straightforward concept. In part this is because of semantic difficulties. Community is too loosely used and has been overstretched to cover very weak association (Fernback, 2007) or evoked disingenuously. For example at the time of writing Amazon has an online space for its customer 'community' and, in the UK at least, the travel sites Trip Advisor offers 'reviews from our community', rather than the legally unacceptable strapline of 'reviews you can trust' (BBC 2012). Terranova (2000) argued, too, drawing on the now historical example of AOL 'community volunteers', that there were serious questions to ask about the meaning of community in the digital economy given a tendency to exploit community members. While these examples are telling, it is often easy enough to sense when community is being misleadingly used. Most people would instinctively expect a community to capture a sense of belonging and a level of reciprocity; the term must count for something and we can usually tell when we have been short-changed.

It is instead at a more normative level that the concept of community has been more subtly undermined and it is sometimes asked whether community is, after all, such a good idea. Indeed the privileging of community has

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been questioned at times within these Networked Learning Conferences, for example in Reynolds & Hodgson (2002), Ferreday & Hodgson (2008) and with, more qualification, by Perriton & Reedy (2002). Perhaps one of the more compelling critiques of community as an aspiration is presented in Hodgson & Reynolds's (2005) paper entitled 'Consensus, Difference and 'Multiple Communities' in Networked Learning' (hereafter 'Multiple Communities'). I want to use the arguments put forward in this paper to frame my presentation. For while 'Multiple Communities' was written ten years earlier, arguments about community have not gone away and, if anything, questions of identity and belonging have become more topical as student bodies have become more international and more diverse.

Many of the arguments put forward in 'Multiple Communities' I found compelling, not least as the paper turned upside down some of the assumptions made when we talk about community. However the authors reached a different conclusion to the one I was expecting, and one I did not share, and I wanted to understand why. I begin by offering a précis of the paper around three key points. I then move to a discussion of each point before setting out what I see as the recurring value of consensus seeking behaviour.

Consensus difference and 'multiple communities: the key arguments

I cannot précis the entire paper but in my view the paper coalesces around three key ideas: we read technology naively; we privilege community; we overstate the value of consensus. These ideas are outlined in more detail below.

We read technology naively

Many writers read a democratic potential into CMC but are wrong to do so. For example while it is often claimed that the asynchronous text based nature of the technology enables hierarchical differentials to be levelled out, or that asynchronous exchange offers a more reflective flow of debate, these are not necessary consequences of using the technology; to argue they are is to slip into technological reductionism. CMC thus became aligned with liberal and communitarian educational principles on shaky grounds.

Community is wrongly privileged

We put more store by community than is merited. This is because we cannot see beyond the common sense notion that learners should relate to one another and should share common goals. Indeed absence of community appears as a symptom of alienation and social fragmentation and our privileging of community might be seen as a reaction against neo liberal ideology with its over emphasis on individual autonomy. Our interest in community has in turn led to the growth of research around 'situated learning' and 'communities of practice'. However in promoting community, and the idea of learning as participation, researchers are neglecting to ask critical questions about asymmetries of power and oppression in the 'communities' they study; Giddens is quoted approvingly to the effect that to be a member of a community 'usually entails subjugation to its core values and norms of behaviour.' Community is not in itself a democratic or desirable goal, it might be coercive and restrictive.

We overvalue consensus

Because we have an uncritical acceptance of community as a goal of social activity we expect consensus amongst members of a community to be emancipatory and rational. However consensus might easily be derived from a desire to conform or a consequence of outright domination. In a networked learning context our fixation with consensus might lead us to neglect those students who feel isolated or marginalised within communities or to fail to see that attempts to introduce democratic procedures into community life may be disingenuous means of obscuring deeply held differences between members. Rather than seek consensus we should, as part of a wider pedagogical project, seek to identify and support a 'politics of difference'. In practice this would mean greater tolerance and promotion of sub groups where members can enlist the support, and develop the confidence, to bring their voices into a more public arena. We should expect defiance as well as consensus to be practised on line. Better than the metaphor of community is that of 'city life' – online networks might mirror the vibrancy and loose ties of the modern city and the tolerant acceptance that there are many different groups we cannot pretend to entirely understand.

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Agreement and disagreement with 'Multiple Communities'

I now look at the strengths of these three arguments, but go on to reach an alternative conclusion.

We read technology naively

This first point is easy to accept. New technology research in education, and indeed in general, has tended to draw naïve conclusions, often jumping from statements as to what the technology makes possible to assumptions as to how the technology will be used. This has produced an overly optimistic view of the consequences of using technology (Gouseti, 2010). It has also established a way of thinking that is often described and critiqued as technological determinism (Selwyn, 2014), or technological reductionism, though a better phrase might be technological 'catalysis' as it is not so much that technology is making certain actions necessary or automatic but rather technology is seen as having a catalytic effect on user agency and creativity. Missing from this catalytic view is that the use of technology is always differentiated - users 'pick up', or fail to pick up, a variety of affordances (Osiurak, Jarry, & Le Gall, 2010) - making it difficult to predict how software will be used. Furthermore any tool is mediated by a wider ecology (Nardi & O'Day, 1999), or assemblage if one prefers (Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh, 2010), so that it must find a niche within existing patterns of social cultural activity and broader cultural norms. Technology cannot in itself address broader sociological phenomena including social stratification and the consequences of stratification on levels of self-confidence and self-esteem (Stanley, 2003). Technology does not change as much as enthusiasts for technology imagine. And even when catalytic, the introduction might not be what is expected or desirable. Here I want to give space to comments by Eve and Brabazon (2008:50 - 51) as the experiences they describe tend to go under-reported. In describing an attempt to promote a synchronous online community among undergraduate students they found:

> The usual power dynamics of a seminar setting, facilitated by the lecturer, were immediately transgressed and became impossible to re-establish. The normative behavior of the group was dictated by their self- characterisation as socializing students rather than learning students. The social rules of group behavior overwrote the more formal normative behaviors associated with sitting in a classroom. The leisure inflection of chat rooms, friends and flames flooded the digital space. The dominant mode of expression in the contributions was flaming, indicating that students were expressing informal, social aspects of themselves not usually conveyed in classroom settings. In addition, the communication was gendered and sexualized. Women were involved in this non-sanctioned behavior but were less extreme in their attacks on others. Significantly, as the swearing and drawings emerged, the women absented themselves from the Virtual Classroom and began to discuss the session-related questions in a discussion board area of the (more) managed learning environment. The session seemed to facilitate a dominant mode of communication that may, outside of that setting, be a minority way of communicating among the students. A fascinating feature of this session was the fact that students acted as though they were anonymous users.

The disruptive influence of technology seems here to be almost wholly negative, albeit tempered by a response from the women in the class to find a more convivial online space. The case put forward in the 'Multiple Communities' paper is right, we do read technology naively. This was important to say ten years ago and remains relevant today when claims about the democratic potential of technology continue to be loosely made (e.g. Castells, 2012).

Community is wrongly privileged

Here the paper itself is open to critique. There is indeed a long tradition of extolling the value of community with, for example, Williams (1985) famously noting that community is never used in a negative sense - though he undermined his own argument a little by noting an earlier association of community with communitarian violence, suggesting that communities can divide as much as unite. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that community tends to be valued more in when it is perceived as absent or undergoing a process of destabilisation – as examples see Engels (1993 / 1845) on city life at time of migration from the countryside; popular reactions, if not the books themselves, to Lynd & Lynd (1937) in the USA and Young & Wilmott's (1957) study of East London and, of course, more recently, see Putnam (1995) and his diagnosis of the decline of social capital. In contrast there have been historical moments in which consensus and conformity, if not community itself, have been strongly critiqued and diversity particularly valued. Such a period occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, particularly in USA, when liberal commentators lauded the idea of pluralism as a counterpoint to

the totalitarianism they had witnessed. This was a time also when critical theorists such as Riesman & Glazer (2001 /1953) raised concerns about unquestioning conformity, a stance that reached its zenith in Marcuse's (2013 /1964) critique of managed consent. Later authors (e.g. Young 1986) valued the mobility and diversity of city life, as opposed to the homogeneity of suburban living. Summing up, Miller (1986) saw a shift in sentiment so that, at least in 'American society', people no longer wanted to be defined by their 'places of origin'. Instead people wanted to be seen as autonomous individuals who 'could and should choose their own social identities and tailor their behavior - and their communities of residence- according to these preferred choices' (Miller, 1986: 355). As presaged by Miller, taken to extremes, the logic of this drive for individual self fulfillment was a 'neo liberalism', with at its centre a concept of 'homo economicus', a person whose actions are guided by individual notions of rationality, individuality and self-interest (Peters 2009), with notions of mutual interdependence pushed firmly into the background.

Community can be both praised and undermined, but in practice many perspectives on community are complicated and at times contradictory. In order to live a social life we need community as a source of support and social identity even if particular communities themselves may be riven by asymmetries of power and repression. As Giddens, whose comments about the oppressive nature of community were noted earlier, also argued we have a yearning for ontological security through association with others and we often negotiate our relationships reflectively rather than unthinkingly (Giddens, 1990). It is probably only from a radical existentialist view that all association within a community is interrogated deeply for inauthenticity; there is a trade off between security and freedom that most of us can recognise. This is the kind of uneasy compromise captured by Wood (2014) as a sense of 'homelooseness' in which one feels both a pull away from one's roots as well as a deep sense of nostalgia for a certain place and time.

Given the tensions inherent in the idea of community it is not surprising that the theorists brought in to bolster libertarian or communitarian positions often present more balanced positions than their supporters suggest. For example the classic liberal position put forward by Mill (1999 / 1859) privileged the individual, and universal, right for self-fulfilment; the only purpose for which power could rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, was to 'prevent harm to others'. Yet Mill agonised over the possible consequences of individual liberty. He wanted to channel liberty into higher order, broadly cultural pursuits and felt we had an innate sense of social responsibility and a 'natural desire to be in unity with fellow creatures' which lead us to care what happens to them. This was a long way from present day neoliberalism described earlier. In contrast, liberal leaning social democrats have sought to temper the full implications of social solidarity with the rights of the individual. This balancing act has been explored in considerable depth by Habermas (1998) amongst others. On one hand Habermas notes the diversity of 'cultural forms of life, ethnic groups, religions, and world views' (1998: 117), a diversity that is constantly growing and needs to be expressed. Habermas notes too that there are considerable constraints on discussion and asymmetries of power, both legal and social cultural (1998: 123). On the other hand his sense of solidarity and concern for mutual recognition leads him to argue that sub cultures should not become closed off from one another; what is needed is a common political language, and an inclusive public sphere (1998: 146).

Perspectives on community are then complex as are their implications for teaching and learning. Strongly communitarian notions seem to lead to a concern for social inclusion and support for marginalised groups (e.g. Raeburn, 1986), and an emancipatory approach to learning often drawing on the work of Addams, Dewey and other action oriented theorists. In similar vein, Rovai (2002), borrowing from McMillan & Chavis's (1986) normative notion of community, argued for a version of online learning community to be based on sprit, trust, participation and learning. In contrast, for Saunders (2010) the dominance of neo liberal thinking has weakened collectivist sentiment and redefined education in terms of individual instrumental gain; the learner has become repositioned as a customer. In this scenario online learning offers a way of giving learners greater choice over content and learner analytics (Williamson, 2015) a means of refashioning teaching and learning around what learners actually do, rather than what educators think they ought to do.

Ideas of community haven been played out too at the level of pedagogy. A recurring frame of reference, indeed a fixation (not a word used by Hodgson and Reynolds but one that seems appropriate in looking at the literature over the past ten and more years), is the idea of social cognition and community of practice (CoP). One reason for this may well be, as the 'Multiple Communities' paper contends, that an interest in *social* cognition emerged in reaction to the extremes of neoliberalism. For a social cognition approach takes as core that participation is learning, something expressed persuasively in Lave and Wenger's idea of CoP. Indeed such has been the

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influence of CoP that, at the time of writing, a search for scholarly articles using the key terms *education* and *community of practice* generated over 100,000 returns. CoP has been consistently raised at Networked Learning Conferences too with over 60 papers in conference archives using CoP as a frame of reference, often a frame which authors endorse (Arnold et al. 2010; Coto and Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2008; Guldberg 2010; Keefer 2010). CoP is and remains a valuable counterpoint to the notion that learning is purely an individual achievement and it sheds valuable light on cooperation and the processes by which groups negotiate agreement. However it is not a pedagogic theory, having its roots in social anthology and business organisations. Crucially CoP does not set out to discriminate between 'good' and 'bad' learning - even if it has undergone refinement as for example when Fuller & Unwin (2004), in discussing professional learning, make a distinction between restrictive and expansive approaches to learning. As 'Multiple Communities' pointed out social cognition is not a satisfactory way to look at learning if we do not interrogate asymmetries among members of communities, or the quality of the process.

We idealise consensus

'Multiple Communities' is again right to argue that we have tended to value consensus as an end in itself. Indeed those promoting networked approaches to learning often seen consensus as core to 'knowledge building' but have paid too little attention as to how any consensus was reached or the grounds on which agreement could justifiably be offered as a claim to truth. Again here the metaphor of CoP can be unhelpful. For example 'reification' for Wenger (1998: 58) involves 'making something abstract into a thing' - a process that leads to a perception that things we create (procedures and artefacts) have 'a reality of their own'. In some ways this is fine, it is describing a phenomenon that takes place both at an internal and external level. However seeing reification in this way leaves no room to engage with a more critical tradition in which reification was used to capture the ways in which commodity exchange promoted purely instrumental relationships and denied, at least for Honneth (in Honneth et al, 2008) our capacity for mutual recognition. If we only see reification as a value free process of intersubjective agreement then we close down alternative ways of seeing the world. Indeed this uncritical perspective is accentuated in mainstream methodologies, such as thematic analysis and, more recently, learning analytics, as they almost preclude a serious examination as to the exercise of power within online communities by focusing on artefacts at the expense of capturing learner voices.

Finally, problems of consensus may be much more subtle than the overt attempts to bully others described in Eve and Brabazon (2008) earlier. In an intriguing contribution, Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) discuss the 'dark side' of participation by which they are referring not to overtly anti-democratic practice, or the kind of illegal activity covered in what is now known as the dark net (O'Hagan 2015), but instead to the inevitable disruption to our customary notion of ourselves which learning implies. We need time and space to 'to imagine, to desire and act differently' and the process might involve some sense of distance even alienation from community to which we have belonged or are expected to belong. They argue instead for 'heterotopian spaces' where disruption should be acknowledged and assumed. At the risk of over simplification we need to work out what we think we think, without having to look over our shoulder at what others might think of what we think. This leaves the promotion of community consensus flawed, not on neo liberal grounds (i.e. we are rational beings who know what we want and do not need a notion of social solidarity to achieve it) but on emancipatory grounds (i.e. we need to demand the space in which we can challenge both ourselves and our community).

Rethinking Consensus and Community

My disagreement with the various critiques made of consensus and community, including the position of the Multiples Community paper, comes down to my conviction that there remains a big idea about learning which is at risk of being thrown out if we give up on consensus seeking community. That big idea is that we can reach a special kind of consensus if we seek to 'background' our prejudices and engage in rational debate – something that might approximate to the disinterested search for truth. A classic cultural artefact we have for consensus as transformative learning is the film and play 'Twelve Angry Men' (several productions of which are available on online). This was the story of the process by which a jury made up of twelve men (and it has to be noted and critiqued, that at the time juries tended to be all men) try to reach consensus on the guilt of a young man beyond 'reasonable doubt'. Eleven are convinced of the young man's guilt or simply too distracted or disinterested to argue further, a dissenter holds out. In something approaching an ideal speech situation (all are allowed to speak, no one is constrained in speaking, all are allowed to question the grounds for any assertion and new assertions can be put forward, see Habermas, 1990) the dissenting jury member is able to get his peers to reassess their initial decisions and find the defendant not guilty. The point is not so much that the right decision was reached (we do not know that conclusively) but that through a rational consideration of the case each juror to varying degrees could see how their background was affecting their decision making; each had uncovered a

little about how they were shaped by the context in which they had lived. Twelve Angry Men remains a compelling point of reference on the value of consensus not because it shows that this is how juries necessarily work, but it models the consequences of reasoned argument. The point about an ideal speech situation is not that a rational consensus can magically appear as there are all manner of distortions in real situations which make it seem only as a theoretical possibility. However we can understand the rules by which rational consensus can be reached and indeed our assumption in engaging in communication with others is that they and ourselves can be won over by the force of the better argument (Habermas, 1987: 337-341). Without a public airing of differences it is difficult to see how the force of the better argument can be accessed. 'When circumstances permit' there is possibility of a kind of consensus seeking that can be emancipatory, or for Mezirow (1997:5) 'transformative', arguing that:

> transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. An example of a habit of mind is ethnocentrism, the predisposition to regard others outside one's own group as inferior. A resulting point of view is the complex of feelings, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes we have regarding specific individuals or groups (for example, homosexuals, welfare recipients, people of color, or women).

The search for consensus is not straightforward and unlike the fictional context of 'Twelve Angry Men' there would be little to be gained by endless invitation to re-assess the basis on which a case is argued if such an invitation was repeatedly rejected. However the search for consensus is an educational one, and we can glimpse its value in the wider literature on networked learning. For example in the context of otherwise socially segregated groups – say Austin (2006) in work involving schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland and Mollov & Lavie's (2001) study of Israeli and Palestinian university students – consensus seeking appears particularly powerful. The enduring allure of the ideal speech situation is expressed by Mann (2005: 47), arguing that consensus seeking can be emancipatory in situations that involve:

> opening up possibilities for expression; seeking understanding; making explicit norms and assumptions in order to question and configure them more appropriately; getting to know the other; checking out different experiences, needs and purposes; voicing different experiences, histories, and positions, and having these accounts heard; receiving response to one's contributions; raising awareness of privilege and inequality; and acting to mitigate these.

The case for consensus seeking need not rule out or underestimate the value of groups or subgroups in education and indeed in civic society more generally. Nor should it ignore that new media provide an opportunity for expression of counter cultural thinking or that such thinking may be best carried out away from a community and may be felt at an intensely personal level. But subgroups need to be the focus of critique too for they may generate and solidify strategic interests, may show asymmetries of power and exercise oppression of their own, and if 'strongly tied' may be seen as cliquish by others (Granovetter, 1973). Sub groups may also be easier for dominant groups to ignore. It is, furthermore, much easier to see the value of sub groups if they seeking a collective strength to present arguments for inclusivity and justice, much more difficult if they are coalescing around claims to racial or gender privilege or an appeal to highly conservative religious dogma (on the latter see for example lively debates in the UK Higher Education community about advice Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) concerning segregation by gender at public academic events). The consensus seeking community is not the only approach to networked learning but it should not be marginal to how we think of knowledge building online.

Conclusion: consensus seeking remains important

In this paper I have looked at a critique of community made by Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) which is indicative of a wider scepticism about online consensus. This scepticism is merited as 'we' (the research 'community' interested in the use of technology) do read technology naively; we do have a tendency to see community when perhaps we should see looser networks and we do want to see solidarity and reciprocity when it might not be there. This has led to an uncritical perspective on community, conformity and a fixation with social cognition. However my argument is that community is important, even if community brings complementary restrictions and drawbacks. Rather than give up on the idea of community, and the idea of consensus contained within networked learning literature, we should, instead, argue for greater interrogation into the way that consensus is carried out, to promote the goals of mutual recognition and envisage what an ideal

speech community might look like online. As argued elsewhere (Hammond, 2015) we can find that striving for consensus is an educational process even if such a search may finish with an agreement to disagree.

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