

# Action Research And Tutoring In The Learning Community: New Implications For Online Adult Education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents some reflections on a study carried out as research student at the Department of Education, Sheffield University (UK). The research context is a post-graduate blended Master in Open Education and Training (MOET) carried out at the Bocconi University in Milano (Italy) in year 2004. The blended course was delivered partially via distance (online) and partially in presence (face-to-face). The study overall is presented as an Action Research approach where the teacher/tutor's personal online experience leads to considerations about possible ways to improve the learning process in online learning communities at post-graduate level.

## Keywords

learning community, action research, adult education, proximity, democracy, trust, assessment.

## INTRODUCTION

The following sections will briefly describe both the research context and the kind of research approach used during the study. As second instance, a brief excursus of the relevant literature on online learning communities is highlighted and their main characteristics analysed. A support from adult education theories is found in order to justify and motivate the use of the learning community metaphor in post-graduate online academic contexts. A description of some emerging issues in the blended Master course from the tutor point of view, will be then presented and some final conclusions drawn.

## THE MOET CONTEXT

The MOET blended post-graduate course was developed at the Bocconi University in Milan (Italy). The main goal of the MOET was that of providing a theoretical basis for the application and realization of a more specific practice in online teaching and learning. The main aim of the course was that of training people with different backgrounds and coming from different contexts, to become expert designers of online courses, both from a didactical point of view and from a pedagogical point of view as well as from a technological one. The 2004 course edition can be defined as 'cohort-based', since it was designed so that students, who started the course in one year, completed all the coursework units together as a cohort. This MOET edition lasted for ten months and it was composed by three online blocks plus the placement and the thesis. It was designed in a blended version, together with face-to-face meetings, for a total of twenty per cent of the overall course work, at the beginning, in between and at the end of the course. Participants were assessed at the end of each block with final individual face-to-face examinations. The online interaction together with the works they produced online in groups, were not assessed. At the same time, one of the main commitments of the course staff was that of sustaining the creation of a learning community of participants. The added value of learning was in its social dimension that tried to enhance the collaborative process, also during its face-to-face meetings. One of the features that differentiate Italian online courses from those from UK is that the role of the tutor is different from that of the teacher. Indeed, while the former is considered as the online process expert, the latter is defined as the content expert who does not necessarily need to be present or to communicate online with participants. This was also a feature of the MOET course as well. Although the UKOU (UK Open University) does distinguish between the roles of content generation (including pedagogy) and tutor, online or otherwise, who 'facilitates' the learning process.

The main technological tool used to support the online asynchronous written text communication was the Conference System "First Class", an e-learning platform constituted by a different numbers of forums and sub-forums classified by topic and sub-topic of discussion. Hence, learning took place mainly through CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) in public forums where all the emails and the written messages were chronologically stored together. In a few limited cases the online communication took place through the exchange of private emails and through the use of a common mailing list.

## THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The use of technologies for teaching and learning is recently growing at a fast rate in the context of University post-graduate adult learning courses. One of the metaphors more diffused and used in this field is that of the “Learning Community” (LC). While a lot of work has been produced in relation to Communities, better known as “Communities of Practice”, less has been done specifically in relation to “Learning Communities” in educational settings (Smith, n.d). Furthermore; little information is available if transposing the Learning Community in the online environment or better when using new technologies for teaching and learning.

This literature review will help in defining the Learning Community and its online environment. Further reflections will be made in relation to the reasons why the use of the “Community Metaphor” can be useful and important while teaching and learning with adult people online.

Within a learning context, in order to clarify how a community is not simply a group of people but a phenomenon involving more and different features and dynamics, an important distinction to make is that between the term “learning team” and “LC”, terms that are often used interchangeably. The distinction made by Michaelsen et al. (2002) between the term cooperative learning (CL) and team-based learning (TBL), might represent a good example of the differences occurring between respectively the “learning team” and the “LC”.

TBL is committed to reach the capabilities of high-performance learning groups among its members such that “as members of a team, individual students become willing to commit to a very high level of effort in their learning, and learning teams are capable of solving problems that are beyond the capability of even their most talented members.” (Michaelsen, et al, 2002, p. 8)

This implies the development of a commitment and of a social unit that is distinct from simple groups. TBL also implies a high level of trust among the member of the team that is not always a central feature in groups. While in TBL there is a high level of interaction between its members, there is also a common commitment to the learning experience that is managed, organized and modified by its members basing on their own needs. Participants learn themselves how to handle functions in the team without assigned or rotating roles and without the continuous tutor’s intervention and the constant presence of a leader (Michaelsen, et al, 2002). Hence, one of the main features that distinguish LCs from simple learning teams is the development of high levels of group cohesiveness, trust and commitment. Participants need to be assessed for individual and for group contributions as well as for team performance. The peer assessment process is considered as central in this learning setting. In LCs a deeper learning process takes place, when participants become active protagonists of their learning, which takes place both at a content level and at a process level, so that they become able to manage their own community by themselves. “Members invite each other to confront their views and to alter them in order to produce a position that is based on the most valid information possible, to which people involved can become internally committed”. (Creese, 2003, p. 3) The features of LCs help participants to develop a sense of identity quite different from those eventually developed as learning teams, with different consequences for the learning process.

Finally, In Panitz’s (n.d.) terms in traditional learning settings, there are two definitions that might characterize the LC: collaboration and cooperation. Both of them are based on knowledge construction, but while the former is part of a non-competitive system and can be less directive and less controlled by the teacher, the latter is more directed and controlled. Based on the above definitions, the term collaboration might constitute one of the main goals and features of a LC. The collaborative process takes place when the learning community has strong and deep roots. The kind and intensity of the collaborative learning processes are the core activities that take place in the community. According to Smith (n.d.) “the results of a meta-analysis on collaborative learning revealed that using collaborative techniques can increase: student academic achievement, diversity, awareness, high-level thinking, inter-group relations and individual self-esteem.” (p. 4)

Collaborative learning can find support in Vygotsky social constructivist theories of learning: higher level of cognitive learning takes place if scaffolds are used during the process and when the more capable peers scaffold the lesser in within the group and the community. Barab et al. (2001) add that collaboration among community members allows them to view one another as part of a whole working together toward the joint goals: in so doing “a community is an interdependent system defined by the collaborative efforts of its members. Being a member entails being part of this network.” (p. 5)

When the above phenomena are mediated by the use of new technologies the simple LC becomes a typical Online Learning Community. One of the main tools used, is CMC (Computer Mediated Communication): it could be defined as a way of exchanging thoughts, idea, information in a form of asynchronous communication, via a computer keyboard and screen, connected to other computers. It is possible to transfer text and pictures, as

well as sounds, carrying out a conversation without being at the same time, in the same place. Messages could be formulated and received whenever was most suitable for the participants. (Berge and Collins, 1995) In this case, the use of CMC in Distance Courses will be considered as a Group Conference, where a “many-to-many communication” will prevail: messages posted by someone, and stored in a virtual locus, (Feenberg, 1989) could be read by all the participants of the conversation.

As for consequence, the definition of the term Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) implies the use of technology in order to facilitate the human communication through a “collective intelligence” and “knowledge construction” (McConnell, 2000). The Online Learning Community becomes then a “virtual” place where people can communicate to each others without meeting physically and where the collaborative learning process can take place. Geer and Au (2002) assert that within an online learning community, fostering collaborative learning is considered essential for positive interdependence, mutual engagement, and construction of knowledge.

In conclusion, new implications different from the face-to-face environment, must be taken into account while dealing with virtual learning communities and those implications are crucial both for the success of learning and for the success of team process. The main aim of this research is that of study these new and emerging characteristics under through an action research approach.

## **A DEFINITION OF ADULT EDUCATION: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE ADULT LEARNING**

One of the central elements to consider while dealing with post-graduate online courses is that in order to design good online courses it is essential to refer to adult education principles. Indeed, having a better understanding of adult education theories and transposing them to the new context of online learning, becomes crucial. This transposition may require a different approach to teaching and learning. It becomes then essential to pose the main focus on the kind of conception of education which is at the basis of adult learning. We will refer to adult education theories that support a “democratic process of learning” which stimulates participants’ autonomy and their capacity to make decisions about their own learning (Boud, 1981). The term adult learning has usually been defined as a learning phenomenon and a learning process specifically addressed to adult people, and involving particular characteristics. Although learning can take place in any setting, usually the most significant kinds of adult learning occur in settings not formally designed. (Brookfield, 1986). Brookfield lists the following principles as central in the practice of adult education. They make adult learning different from any other kind of learning setting:

- ✓ participation in learning is voluntary and supported by high motivations to learn so that curriculum have to be grounded in adults’ experiences;
- ✓ effective practice is based on respect among participants where they can feel free to challenge the others and feel comfortable with being challenged too;
- ✓ Facilitation is collaborative: “the group process involves a continual renegotiation of activities and priorities in which competing claims are explored, discussed, and negotiated.” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 10) Responsibilities are assumed at different times by various members of the group.
- ✓ praxis is the heart of the learning process, action and reflection are interdependent and crucial processes for learning;
- ✓ Facilitation aims to foster a spirit of critical reflection and self-directed empowerment among adults. It means that goals and evaluative criteria should not be imposed by an external authority but should be continually negotiated between participants and facilitator in within a mutual challenging context.

The challenge here is related, on how to apply in practice in an online learning environment, traditional adult education principles. One of the most diffuse and creative ways is that of the learning community and collaboration. Indeed, the principles of democracy, trust, diversity, self-esteem, self-awareness of LCs, already discussed in the previous sections of this paper, justify this kind of approach and the same principles. The Online Learning Community represents a virtual and artificial setting where people can live, apply and practice together the main educational principles of adult education. This “protected environment” where free experimentation for learning is possible, is of great value for personal grown and change. Online learning to be effective should support the individual growth through independent decision making and reciprocal collaboration. This is also what is stated by Hodgson et. all. while they refer to “Developmental Dissemination”

“the curriculum is open; individuals are encouraged to take on the responsibility for the direction and content of their own learning.” (Hodgson et. All. 1987, p. 166) and this was also Lucilla Crosta’s experience when she was a student in a blended module called “New Technology and Lifelong Learning” in 2001 at the University of Glasgow (UK) (Crosta, 2002).

More considerations derive from Kramarae’s view on feminist theories. (Kramarae & Spender, 1993) In open learning there is a new way of “building knowledge” which is different from the way used in traditional academic contexts and in distance learning as well. The democratic way of building knowledge seems to find its own roots, in open learning, where negotiation, discussion and sharing prevail for a common and human growth.

Winter adds that “the curriculum is then conceived as an ongoing-action-research-process, rather than a fixed body of knowledge”. (Winter, 1998, p. 59)

Theory into practice and practice into theory are crucial both for feminism and for online learning.

These principles at the basis of feminist theories and adult education generally are those supporting open learning: both can find a specific way to express themselves using new technologies for “building democratic knowledge”. The challenge here is related, on how to apply in practice adult education principles in online learning communities.

## **THE LEARNING COMMUNITY METAPHOR FOR ONLINE ADULT LEARNING.**

According to Misanchuk and Dueber, (2001) the modern pedagogy encourages the use of group works and communities for high learning academic standards. Barab et. All. (2001) point out how it is important to focus on the sociability issue rather than on the design issue, sociability defined as shared purpose and social integration among group members.

Hall (2003) adds that the main question to pose here is: why might and individual want to work with others? According to Smith (n.d.), the use of virtual teams is growing especially in educational organizations since there are many advantages to working in virtual teams: collaboration, negotiation, peer interactions, co-construction of knowledge. Indeed “the best conditions for intellectual accomplishment are environments that are motivated by discovery, the reciprocal feedback between mutually respected persons and the free exchange of ideas.” (p. 3-4). Educators should be able to communicate to participants how the learning outcomes can be best achieved by mutual help and interactions. In so doing individuals might come together in communities in order to achieve collectively what they cannot achieve individually.

For these reasons, enabling trust through communication is essential in this process. The use of the community metaphor can help developing the sense of identity and empowerment among people, as essential elements for learning.

What it is more the authors argue that building reputation and establishing one's own online identity helps to motivate people in participating. Hence, if we are aware that we have a specific goal, scope, function (identity) in that specific community, we are more motivated to participate to it and to be part of it.

For all the above reasons, the present moment is characterised by great possibilities both for learners and educators, since the value given to Community as an emerging learning metaphor, could help sustain the respect of democracy, autonomy and the human grown among individuals in within the online learning process.

At the present moment there are also quite few studies and researches that try to analyze the online learning community from a pedagogical and educational point of view, and this is more evident in academic post-graduate settings. What we intend to do here is trying to focus on some of the key elements emerged from the MOET study, and discuss the most significant features that in our view might help the teacher/tutor improving his/her learning process in the online learning community. Since we are convinced that as any learning setting the online learning environment is a very complex one, we think that its study should support a holistic and systemic view of learning, where each element influences the other, acting as a network. In the following section, we will propose a deep explanation of each of the emerging elements basing on Lucilla’ personal MOET tutoring experience.

## **SELF-REFLECTION AND ACTION RESEARCH IN ONLINE TUTORING**

This section of the paper is based on some reflections made after an experience that Lucilla Crosta did as online tutor in the MOET using an Action Research Approach and as anticipated in an early version of this paper (Crosta and McConnell, 2005). She tutored two blocks of the course, from February till June 2004. During this experience, she completed a daily diary with personal reflections that helped her in better understanding and

improving her practice both as online tutor and as action researcher. She constantly received feedback about her ongoing practice from her supervisor, from the MOET course director and from her colleagues and participants. Her online tutoring was the result of a continuous process of planning, action, observation and reflection basing on the Action Research Cycle and of improvement of her own teaching practice. The following considerations are the results of this process.

### **The staff community**

One of the main problems she observed and that emerged during the past editions of this blended course as well, was related to the relationship among the staff members. Due to organizational changes, the staff composition evolved during the years and it was not always easy for people coming from different countries and with different backgrounds, working together. What it was more, not all members owned the same level of knowledge in relation to online courses and this caused disharmony and conflicts that influenced both the well being of the group and that of participants’.

Stringer (1996) states how the presence of a big institutional community can influence the life of the smaller it contains.

Further, participants were aware on how sometimes, the course was lacking of organization, or how contradictory behaviours emerged among staff members causing confusion and mistrust. For each course block, there was not always a preliminary briefing and a complete circulation of information among all the staff members. Indeed, the online tutors for example, were those who were not directly involved in the course design process. Kennedy and Duffy (2004) state how it is important that the “team” is the one who deliver education and not the individual staff member. Indeed collaboration among staff members was essential for the success of the course.

One of the key elements that in Lucilla’s experience would help to sustain and improve a meaningful learning experience in the online community is that of the “staff community” that lays behind the learning setting.

With this term she refers to the group of people that designed, coordinated, organized etc., the learning experience of a specific setting and that put their best efforts in order to make the learning experience, as much enjoyable as possible.

The staff community is important for the success of the learning process, because it represents a first approach to the community concept that participants will later face online. When the course staffs first enjoy the experience of being a LC, then also participants will be able to learn from what the staff’ behaviour is able to show them. The smaller community of participants will be able to properly learn who they are and what they are doing there, if the bigger staff community is properly working. The latter might show to the former, values, meaningful relationships, sociability, trust, negotiation, conflicts and this is even more important if the learning experience is online. Indeed, the lack of physical contact and of physical relationships, typical of the online environment, might be overcome in a certain way, if the staff community helps participants to feel less isolated from each other and if they are able to transmit a general commitment to the course, democratic teaching and learning principles, social relationships, cohesiveness, collaboration, trust and so on. Participants will soon own the feeling of being part of a community and they will behave consequently. Now, given the great potential that the metaphor of LC owns while teaching and learning with adults, it is not surprisingly the great role it plays in the learning process. Issues of power and authority, although always present while dealing with people and groups, can be shared in a democratic way enhancing the learning success and creating a sense of identity among participants essential online, where people usually lack of physical proximity.

One interesting feature that Lucilla noticed during the MOET course was that although the intent of the course staff was that of creating and forming working online communities, they did not have the time for properly building them. Hence, although this was one of their main aims, they were aware of the fact that this effectively did not happen. Indeed, for what was Lucilla’s experience, in the MOET course, the team of participants never reached the status of a real online community. Usually in the group, the presence and the big faith in the leader and in his/her strong power caused sometimes some problems to individuals’. One particular event was significant both for the life of the online groups and for their learning process as well as for the tutor. In the course there were 2 tutors tutoring 3 different groups in total. During the last block of the course a question was asked to one tutor by its groups and the same question was asked by another group to its tutor. Unfortunately, lack of communication among the staff members, and the role of intermediaries that the tutors had to play between participants and the teachers, produced different answers that at their time produced different reactions, confusion and misunderstanding among participants. This event caused the consequent lack of trust in the tutor answers and behaviour, the growing faith in the group leader rather than in the group as a whole and the reciprocal lurking that each groups made in order to check other participants and tutors behaviours while dealing

with the same problematic online. From this very moment the group stopped to properly working, since they became afraid of creatively and independently investing in their learning process. They had never more the chance to become a real and sounding online learning community. They just continued working cooperatively and accomplishing tasks and activities settled by the course staff. At the same time, we think that since the online learning community did not have the chance to concretely take place, it was easier for dynamics of this kind to appear. The group did not work independently with a common role sharing but it depended to the will of a single powerful leader. The group did not have enough time to critically create and reflect on the learning content: the time of the course was completely devoted to accomplish the tasks and the activities given and to producing a big amount of tables, works and documents. Democracy, trust and independence were just at their first stage and both the staff community and the course design did not effectively helped in realising this. Lucilla became aware of the fact that when participants work online as a group rather than as a community and when they lack of trust in the course staff, there is very less that the tutor could do in order to manage the group leader and to stimulate free thinking and creative learning. Learning is then stoked and canalised in the standardised parameters of the course design itself. The lack of trust becomes real both in what participants are doing and learning and in what the staff propose them to do. A general state of confusion owns the scene and learning becomes then compromised.

Although the team was more or less autonomous while working online, Lucilla was aware of how sometimes it needed guidelines from the tutor on how organize the group work. It was very time consuming for the group to reach a common agreement about the roles sharing, also because of the presence of very strict deadlines. Many times the group leader alone produced a lot of works and a big amount of documents in a very short time, making the online communication very hunting and hard to follow. This was in Lucilla's view a sign of the lack of group self-organization. It is possible that a bigger level of socialization in within the group might have helped all participants to work all together in a more harmonious and efficient way but this is just a tentative explanation. It is however certain that the lack of socialization among staff members might have compromised the online group cohesion itself. However, she had a general feeling that in all groups she tutored, participants did not owned their own identity as a community; she think that their work was more cooperative than collaborative and that supported more individualistic and competitive view of learning rather than a more collaborative ones. This situation in her view, penalized learning.

The absence of a critical and cohesive Staff community, together with other elements explained below, may have influenced this process and may have lead participants to forming just simple groups rather than autonomous LCs.

### **The online assessment**

The feature of assessment is in our view another central element in teaching and learning online. In the MOET all the assessments were carried out in presence on an individual basis, depending on the online or face-to-face activity, at the end of each course block. In the last block of the course, however it was proposed the online peer assessment experience and Lucilla noticed how it positively stimulated reflection and critical thinking among participants. At the same time, she was also aware of how it was difficult for some individuals to assess other people work, since during the course, they were always assessed by the staff.

Another interesting issue observed was related to participants' level of online participation. When in the last block, participants knew that they were not supposed to be assessed for their online group works and discussion; they seemed to reduce the level of their online participation and interaction. Despite the high marks participants received with their final assignments, Lucilla was not sure that the learning process undertaken was as effective as stated by their course marks. The personal commitment required during the course, was not indeed, that of deeply reflect on their learning experience and on the learning content but just that of produce a big amount of works. Lesser attention was given to the process and more to the course content and this emerged also during the assessment procedures. Hence, in Lucilla's view what was measured with the final assessments was neither the learning process itself, nor the critical thinking and reflection, but just the works produced. Indeed, if one of the course aims was that of building an online LC, self and meta-reflection should be considered as essential element of the learning process but here they were completely missed out.

Another interesting feature here in our view was also that, what influences the LC life and the learning process is also that knowing in advance the way participants will be assessed, will influence the way they will learn in the near future (Mason, 2002) and this both in relation to traditional learning settings and more in relation to the online learning environment where the use of the community metaphor is enhanced. According to McConnell (2002), a more individualistic, peer reviewed or group assessment process will drive adults motivation to learn online in a more individualistic or collaborative way. Hence, for a higher community learning level process, is preferred a mix in the use of self, peer and group assessment methods. Participants will feel more responsible

for their community, for their learning and for the learning of the others and they will be able to achieve higher learning goals. Reynolds et al (2004) presenting a case study on an online module in within a Master University course concludes saying that:

“...assessment is arguably the most important aspect of an educational programme in which to introduce collaborative principles. It is this intervention that develops the design from the instrumental to a more fundamentally participative approach. Yet, as a student observed: assessment was partly responsible for constraining what people said to each other and which led as consequence to a lack of debate and dialogue.” (Reynolds et al, 2004, p. 256)

On a weekly basis the tutor was also needed to give a written common public feedback to the group activities and works. Although the feedback was felt as useful by the course staff, Lucilla had some doubts that it was felt as useful as from participants' point of views. Sometimes Lucilla felt that a prompter feedback was needed online in moments quite different from those agreed for the weekly feedback and this produced two different behaviours in the two tutors: one of them gave the feedback just on the weekly agreed date while the other gave the feedback both on the agreed date and on other moments needed during the week. This different behaviour was noticed by participants that developed a different level and kind of interaction with the tutors also basing on their interventions online. The more the tutor was intervening and discussing with them online the most they discussed with her and asked questions and helps. This because Lucilla tried to adapt her online interventions to the ongoing group life and she found this quite useful for her practice and for participants' learning experience. On the other hand, she was not sure about the value that participants gave to the weekly feedback, although she was convinced that it was more welcome and important when it sustained the relationship, emotions and feelings rather than when it reported how they worked online together.

Lucilla felt that in order to face some individual and more personal issues with participants also an individual feedback was needed on a common basis but this was not introduced in the course design. Sometimes a clear discrepancy between what were the real participants' needs and what was the course design was felt by the tutor but with little or no chance to make any change in order to fulfil these needs since the tutors were not directly involved in the course design process from the very beginning. This was also due to the particular role of “intermediaries” between the teachers and participants that they cover in the Italian online context.

### **The Ethics of Care and the Sense of Proximity**

During Lucilla's experience as online tutor in the MOET, she became more and more aware on how the moral, psychological and affective support was crucial for participants learning experience online, more than the need of content explanations. Indeed, this was essential when sometimes they met technical problems while using the tool, or when they were stressed by the deadlines and when they were more or less discouraged by a particular activity. She noticed how at the beginning and at particular phases of the learning experience, people were happy to receive this kind of support by the tutor. The tutor/participants relationship was quite informal and Lucilla's interventions and feedback quite constants; she sometimes made the use of irony where possible and all these helped her to feel part of the group too. It was her intention to develop and apply an “ethics of care”, paying attention to other people's needs, although it was not always easy to understand personal problems and situations. She noticed how it was important to understand the different background and learning styles of participant in order to apply a different behaviour for each. Indeed, she is convinced that the way how the tutors behave online, influence the way how people behave and learn online: promoting for example a more relaxed and informal environment may favour the online learning process and viceversa. Further, a possible source of anxiety was for Lucilla the fact that the role of the tutor was split from that of the teacher. Indeed, since the teacher was the content expert, he/she became someone who to report to although he/she was not online. Hence, from this point of view it was not always easy for Lucilla to understand which were the teacher's expectations in relation to a particular situation, also because the teacher was not completely aware of what was happening online. Thus, in her view it was not easy to reconcile the tutor and the teacher's roles and views in particular circumstances. What it was more, both the process and the content were strictly integrated in the learning experience and so it was quite hard to understand and to share sometimes questions directly related to the context and some other times questions addressed to the process.

Another important issue Lucilla touched was that of trust: she noticed that in order to be a good online tutor and to own a kind of authority it was essential to gain participants' confidence. She also noticed that when there is a lack of trust learning is lost.

Wenger (1998) proposes the term “home for identity” in defining some characteristics of the community. We like the use of the expression “home” in the online context, since it makes think about a place where people feel comfortable, where it is possible for them to experiment things together and where they are cared, scaffold by

others and where they care and scaffold others too. The Nodding's "Ethics of care" and the "Sense of Proximity" theories are in our view good metaphors that can help in supporting the process of learning online and the development of the community.

In order to create the learning community and to implement the online collaborative process, it may be helpful to consider the role that the "Caring relationship" plays. Goldstein (1999) starts considering Vygotsky's theory of social-construction of knowledge where in the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) teacher and students or students and students exchange a common ground of knowledge and construct it. Goldstein argues that the relationship between the teacher and learner in the ZPD is very similar to that of Nodding's theory drawn on feminist moral theory's notion of the "Ethic of Care" where the process of construction of knowledge resembles to that of a caring encounter. The "tutor" should scaffold the student in the learning activities and decrease his/her intervention while the student gaining more and more autonomy could learn how to take care of the others. The tutor "cares" for the creation of this community and for the relationships among its members. According to McConnell (2000) the presence of a supportive learning environment is then central when designing for CSCL. When learners facilitate, encourage, help, provide feedback and act in trusting ways to each others, this can produce the conditions to take risks, to take differently from the norm... etc. Learning occurs together with the sense of community and of trust. Trust is indeed creating an atmosphere of caring, taking time to listen to each other producing feelings of security, taking risks and push themselves and the others beyond their boundaries (McConnell 2002).

Goldstein asserts that "the major implication of this enhanced view of the knowledge-making process is the conclusion that caring relationships are a central part of intellectual growth and development" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 669). Gregory (1994), reporting Nodding's thought adds an important feature to this thesis, asserting that although the community approach tries to stress democratic principles among its members, it does not consider that it is not easy to make people immediately democratically collaborate with each other, since they own different views and conflict it is easy to emerge. It must be taken into account that differences are part of the community too.

"This reading begins with Nodding's discussion of an ethics of care that relies on the empathetic identification of one person with another to bridge difference." (p. 65) and further Nodding makes a critique of ethical systems conceived as community where people own common goals:

"The efforts of these people may be parallel and may occasionally be cooperative, but the commitments and purposes that drive them remain individual and that makes their cooperation contingent upon a compatibility ensured by agreement. This individualism is the focus of Nodding's critique of ethical systems that require of community a common commitment to principle. while they can direct people toward actions that support the common good, these systems keep people separate in both their motivation and intention, making their connection vulnerable to conflict. That is why, for her, ethical collectivity must be grounded upon commitments to the people with whom working principles or projects might be shared." (p. 65)

According to Hodgson and Reynolds (2002) the shape of identities can be indeed harmonious and conflictual as well as collaborative and this is what we might expect to happen in online learning contexts as well. The presence of "Conflicts" can support the development of individual as possibility of exchange, although it is essential to avoid its negative degeneration (McConnell, 2005). The "Community metaphor" in teaching and learning owns also dark sides of power and democracy that are not usually addressed and known enough. The LC metaphor is most of the time diffused and positively emphasised but it also needs to reveal its limits, in order to be well managed by course designers, teachers, tutors and educators (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005).

As for consequence, the role of the tutor at a first stage, is crucial for the learning process in developing this "Caring Relationship", Due to the presence of differences and of conflicts in the online community, the tutor should be able to transmit the presence of this "Caring Environment", fundamental for the respect of differences and for the learning process to freely take place.

However, it is not always certain that the presence of an adult (tutor) can support and stimulate more reasoning in participants and more empathetic relationships online.

Further, Lucilla noticed how the presence of face-to-face meetings at the beginning, in the middle and at the course end, helped her and participants to establish a more strict relationship. Indeed, people had the chance to fill the gap that "the distance" produces and to establish more informal and closer relationships. She also had the chance to get in touch with participants in a deeper way and this helped her online tutoring too. She noticed that those who did not participate to the face-to-face meetings did not always act as part of the group online. Hence, the design of face-to-face meetings was vital in our view for the course life. We think that the presence of face-



to-face meetings gave a great input to the online community life, creating, for example, a change in its rhythm. However, Lucilla also noticed how, when someone attended these face-to-face meetings from remote locations, using synchronous tools such as chat, video and so on, she felt like they were present with the group and this improved her sense of “proximity” with them. She noticed that other participants experienced the same and the same was for those participating at the face-to-face meetings from remote locations. On the other hand, if a participant missed this “physical meeting” at the beginning of the course, it was quite hard for him/her to easily becoming part of the online group: she/he needed more support from the group and from the staff than the others. However, for what was Lucilla’s online experience, she cultivated closer relationships with those people together whom she communicated more often online, rather than with others. Hence, in her case, the online environment was not a barrier to socialisation but a great starting point for it. The use of a synchronous chat for example, supported the creation of closer relationships. The synchronous communication can be considered as a tool able to enhance people sense of identity online and their sense of proximity and it might constitute at the same time a good substitute to face-to-face meetings when they are not feasible or possible for all. When there are for example, courses carried out at international level or when participants are dislocated in far away areas from each others it might become a problem to organise physical meetings. Basically in the MOET, people worked for a 10% of the whole course in synchronous/f2f/presence way and for 90% online. This blended course design also taught us that in within the whole online experience just few and regular synchronous contacts are sufficient for improving physical proximity among participants. If these synchronous “virtual meetings” are designed at regular intervals, the asynchronous communication can continue to represent a meaningful tool for the people of the community also without physical face-to-face meetings. Hence, in our view, a course carried out just in an online version, can be as effective as a course designed in a more blended version.

In this respect, Goldstein quotes the importance of “the Sense of Proximity”: people are always looking for “the near”, people need to establish a “physical contact” when they relate to each other and this concept is very important online and also linked to the previous concept of the “Ethics of Care”. Allucquerce asserts that “Members of electronic virtual communities act if the community met in physical public space” (Allucquerce, 2000, p. 519). Hence it is very important, in our view, to bear in mind that in an Online learning environment participants are always looking for a kind of a “physical proximity” with others and this was also Lucilla’s experience in the MOET course.

In a community, this sense of proximity is important because it helps creating a sense of belonging and of identity. Sometimes the synchronous communication can help in this: it provides a sense of belonging to a community that is felt as our own since we contribute to its creation and since we feel responsible for it. (Wenger, 1998) Wenger adds that although communities are part of a bigger constellation of other communities the thing that really matters for its members is the local. Indeed, it is in the local that takes place the negotiation of meanings and the creation of new practices. It is in the local that the mutual engagement takes place and it is in the local that the member identities take shape. Hence, in the online environment the “sense of proximity” considered here also as a “feeling of the local” is crucial for the cultivation of the community. Local does not imply the “geographic near” but just the sharing of things, the strict relationships, the mutual engagement, the exchange of experiences and common goals ...things that can take place also in the online learning environment. However, Wenger (1998) suggests that there might be different levels of participation inside a community and that non-participation can be a form of learning and participation too. McKendree et al (1998) showed also that observing the online dialogue can be useful for learners, although this might seem to apparently create a lack of physical proximity. Lally and Barrett (1999) on the other hand, add that one of the main features of the online community is the “Socio-Emotinality”. The creation of social online events and places may contribute to make participants feel as a part of a community, where the support mechanism of “Feeling involved” is crucial. “The significant levels of online-socio-emotional material appear as Harasim suggests to have contributed in our groups to a sense of group identity and community” (p. 153) and in our view to a sense of proximity too.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The goal of building an effective online learning community was not completely achieved by the MOET course staff in our view, most of all because of the influence of the issues discussed in the above sections. This produced consequently some barriers to learning since the group was not ready yet to independently face some unexpected problems and to autonomously managing the community. The goal of a course block of producing “creative and independent thinking” was higher than participants’ real achievements and than the way in which the course overall and its activities were designed. This destabilised participants and their learning. This means that Lucilla was not sure how much the online learning process and her online tutoring was effective although the high score collected by most of participants during the final face-to-face course assessments. Sometimes the collection of high scores is not a clear signal of an effective learning process online and sometimes designing

high learning goals, higher than the activities effectively designed and used for their accomplishment, may produce, ineffective learning, frustration, confusions and lack of trust in participants and tutors. These feelings are quite difficult to manage and to control online, since any further written explanation and answer may produce in the reader more vicious and ambiguous behaviour than expected. It is certainly however that, for an effective online learning community to take place, there is the need of the presence of many elements together, influencing each others, factors that sometimes are both in the tutor and in the course designer/teacher's hands. If these two roles are separated, like it happened in Italy and in the MOET, in our view it is necessary for them to work collaboratively, adapting their individual practice to the ongoing course development. The tutor is the member of the staff that more than anyone's is in direct contact with participants and that can make quicker and more effective interventions and changes in the learning setting. However, he/she can do very few if the course design is not flexible enough to be adapted to participants learning needs and if he/she do not own the power to do so. What it is more, in our view, the role of the tutor is even more influential than that of the "process expert", since sometimes he/she has to deal online with issues like proximity, care, sociability, trust, identity etc... that go further beyond the competencies of a common face-to-face teacher. Hence, one of the recommendations we feel to make here, is that carefully designing of online learning communities is as essential as continuously supporting them to take place, since these communities are very often the results of more complex factors interacting together and the results of some other unpredictable variables depending from context to context.

The emerging issues analysed in the above paragraphs represent just a first approach to a better understanding of online learning communities and of teaching and learning online. It is certain that due to its new features and to its new characteristics, the online learning environment requires new and creative approaches of study that must take into account its diversities if related to face-to-face traditional teaching contexts.

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