

Ideas of Community and Implications for Theorising Networked Learning

Overview of symposium

The aim of the proposed symposium is to look at the different ways that the idea of community is being used inside and outside of the educational literature. The intention is to look at a wider literature than that which is most regularly referred to within the education and learning literature. The proposed papers will attempt to use the ideas within these different literatures to examine and critique both the potential and/or imagined benefits and issues that are assumed or claimed for the idea of community within learning situations, within educational contexts and within networked learning in particular.

During the symposium we will seek to draw on both theoretical as well as practical work that draws on and develops the idea of community. We hope that the symposium will make a contribution to the development of both the theory and practise of networked learning.

Organised by: Vivien Hodgson

Networks and Communities: an Actor-Network Critique of Ideas on Community and Implications for Networked Learning

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ABSTRACT

It is sometimes that the net is a kind of new world community, at least a frontier land where new communities are emerging (Rheingold, 1993). Perhaps the net can refresh democracy, offering new forms of more direct 'digital democracy' (Hague and Loader, 1999). In this paper, the general notion of community as a space of social solidarity is challenged and contrasted with Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities'. Habermas's notion of the 'public sphere' shows how new voices and new imagined political communities arise from private communities. I illustrate this, connecting ideas from community of practice and actor-

network theory, by reference to the case of Mary Wollstonecraft and the networks which succeeded her.

Keywords

community, actor-network, network, learning, politics.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of community carries a heavy burden. It is often suggested that in postmodern culture we lack a community we used to have, presumably located earlier last century, the 1950s maybe. And in previous merely modern times it was also said that we lacked a community we used to have, presumably during feudalism. The notion of community is often implicated in a sense of lack, even of longing, the desire to belong which arises in the realisation of actually being alien or alienated. We look around for culprits. Modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation: these are the social forces which wrenched our ancestors from the close ties of idyllic feudal relations, where each knew their place, and brought us in three of four generations to an isolated slot in the windy post-Corbusier concrete corridors of mass-society, experiencing various forms of 'new-town blues'. And from this alienated location we increasingly turn to the small screens of the TV set and the computer terminal for a simulated sense of connection with an outer world.

Virtual communication provides connection in the concrete jungle. City-dwellers know that to have any sort of social life they must be well-organised and cannot rely upon chance encounters with the person next door or in the shop. They must pursue more specialised points of connection other than accidents of proximity. The internet offers academics the chance to specialise further by choosing to interact globally with others who share their interests, rather than their colleagues on the same corridor, who are fascinated by other things. The idea of specialisation, a central idea in the story of modernisation and industrialisation, has been linked for over a century with a certain sort of solidarity: the equality, fraternity and liberty of the trades union movement. Specialists of the world unite and join the same union, fight for the same interests, protect the time-served and time-honoured practices they/we have come to trust, to appreciate as a traditional part of our culture. Within such social spaces we have the sense of highly specialised mutual fascination with some topic or other or some practice or other and the possibility of a highly functional self-preservation society. Leading international experts are in my address-book, I am connected, you can't touch me, I'm part of the union, or professional association.

To arrive at the happy point where one is virtually connected with the community of one's choice through the networked p.c. undoubtedly involves a process of networked learning. Learning processes are not always structured by well-intentioned educators, however. Lave and Wenger (1991), in discussing socially situated learning, point out that learning takes place outside educational contexts 'in the wild' as it were (to borrow a phrase from Edwin Hutchins, 1995). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991) amongst others have articulated the view that this wild learning is not totally wild, but that it is governed and regulated by communities of practice. The nature of communities of practice, as discussed in Lave and Wenger (1991) draws upon a mixture of anthropological studies, within and outside modern Western culture. It is hard to escape the sense that their description of such communities is already romanticised. Most of these communities were not designed by educational or organisational designers. They grew up naturally in places like Yucatec and Goa amongst the practitioners of traditional midwifery and tailoring. Yet, these communities had much in common with what Brown and Duguid call 'non-canonical' communities found within the interstices of the large formal organisations of the bureaucratised modern world.

Lave and Wenger also cite sub-cultures of the modern world - e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous - and they present occupations as sub-cultures too - e.g. supermarket meat-cutters and US naval quartermasters. In these latter cases, it is apparent that the communities of practice in question have been set up, have been designed. Supermarket meat-cutters are not the same as the crafts-people known as butchers, the latter have more in common with Goan Tailors and Mayan midwives, but supermarket meat-cutters are the product of a profession deliberately de-skilled by design; they know how to do certain cuts, as on an assembly line, but do not know what to do with a whole dead animal. The US naval quartermasters, on the other hand are a deliberately up-skilled profession, capable of doing their work by hand and mental arithmetic but also capable of using sophisticated technology. The point in Lave and Wenger's discussion is that here in various work settings - traditional or newly designed - we find a learning process akin to informal apprenticeship, based on the principle that peripheral participants who have a legitimate role because they are helping the skilled practitioners may watch and mimic and learn. They may be given a chance to do more difficult tasks and in doing so they learn more and accomplish more. In learning how to perform as skilled practitioners do, they gain knowledge and skill and they become a practitioner. They learn a new identity. An identity, pre-formed by more established practitioners, acquires them.

Community of practice theory presents an understanding of community which is different from the pastoral idyll and different too from the big urban city (Reynolds, 2000). It is a community which is specialised around some specific practice or other, a single task, occupation, interest or profession. It may rely on a certain amount of formal education as a pre-requisite for joining (e.g. the US naval quartermasters often had to attend training school), but the real learning comes from the triadic communal relations between old-timers, young journey-men and/or women and newcomers, i.e. real learning comes from the social relations between people with

more knowledge and skill interacting with people with less knowledge and skill in the pursuit of a common practice.

Addressing community of practice theory in relation to networked learning, Fox (2002) argued that the concept of networked learning should not simply refer to education designed to be distributed electronically, such as open and distance education. Nor should it simply refer to learning through electronic networks more widely, such as through the everyday experience of the web and the internet, email, MUDs and computer conferencing, all of which involve learning processes dependent upon transient communities of practice as fellow users trade tips and practices pertinent to these technologies, much as passengers on the public transport systems frequently trade tips on flight delays, strikes and rumours of strikes, and ways to reliably achieve their goals. In addition to these notions of networked learning, which correlate with formal education and situated learning and with alienated modernity and lost community, we should consider the implications of actor network theory for these notions of community and networked learning.

To summarise, the small screens of TV and the networked personal computer, offer a feeling of community within mass society. Community of practice theory helps us understand community on a small scale, with a practical purpose at stake, but how should we understand a wider notion of community beyond that? The next section addresses this question, looking at how communities of practice can network to build wider communities, a process which actor network helps to explain. Beyond that we address the role of imagination and the interaction between private communities of practice and the public sphere, which together net-work to produce imagined communities. The paper concludes by discussing implications for networked learning theorists and designers.

Communities and networks

The concept of community carries with it an idea of a social whole, a unity. In the communities of practice, we have an idea of community which serves a specific purpose. This functional specificity binds the members of the community of practice just as it fragments them from other similarly specialised communities. The modern community of practice is no pastoral idyll, but a highly functional unit, even if its function is not formally approved by the hierarchies that institute organisational and social structures of all kinds, indeed its non-canonicity is celebrated (Brown and Duguid, 1991). The community of practice notion tells us that a few friends and weirdoes gathered together in various sorts of 'skunkworks' can beat the system and for Brown and Duguid the organisational system is a community of communities of practice.

However, it is doubtful whether any wider - organisational or societal - overarching community exists as a *community* in the traditional way. Or if it does, maybe it's a different kind of community than a community of practice. Brown and Duguid tell us that "...the canonical organisation becomes a questionable unit of analysis" (1991: 49). This observation is based on the fact that many of the non-canonical communities of practice actually traverse the boundary of the formal organisation. For example, in clothes retailing there may be a community of practice which links buyers and suppliers more strongly in terms of the shared practice of selling clothes than any sort of community between buyers and the accounts department of their own company.

I would like to suggest that if there is any kind of overarching structure it is more accurately described as a network than as a community of communities of practice and this network produces an imagined community. I would like to give an actor-network reading of (a) 'macro' structures and communities; and (b) show how actor-networks and communities of practice differ and connect. I will then discuss implications for the study and practice of networked learning.

Macro Structures

What kind of structure is the internet? There are some that present the entire thing as a massive 'community' in the sense that it forms a new public sphere capable of sustaining new kinds of democracy - digital democracy (Hague and Loader, 1999). When modern democracy took off in the eighteenth century, the citizens were limited to men who owned property, a very small slice of national populations which were, in any case, very much smaller than today (Held, 1996). The idea of democracy that motivated the gradual institutionalisation of democracy in France, the UK and the USA was based on the ideals of early Athenian democracy as modified by the Venetian city republics during the Renaissance and as modified and defended by Machiavelli in the sixteenth century. A characteristic of all these earlier accounts of republican democracy was that the populations involved were small enough for democracy to be more or less direct, i.e. the citizens (propertied men) were so few in number that they all knew each other or of each other and could speak for themselves directly to each other, with little need for representatives. Even the various forms of liberal democracy which followed Hobbes and Locke, shared something of this characteristic. But over the last two centuries the growth of the population and the extension of the franchise meant that direct democracy was gradually replaced by representative democracy. Mass populations never achieved the sense of direct democratic participation in their communities and only political elites suffered this loss, which many of us can nonetheless identify with, as we do with the aristocratic families who lost their great historic houses as we pound the tourist trails of the world.

By the time the internet came on stream in the West, the sense of alienation from political processes - which arguably reached a height in the late 1960s - was widespread. In this context, claims about digital democracy, courtesy of the internet, built in America,

land of the free, were refreshing. Maybe the internet could revivify direct participation in government at local, regional, national and international levels (Hague and Loader, 1999) and provide an alternative form of community to the impersonal non-community of the big cities (Smith and Kollock, 1999). Experiments in such forms of digital democracy are going on, but the internet has also expanded the cultural horizons of the internet user, who is now a cyber-citizen of the world wide web. National identities are being rewritten and thrown into question (Anderson, 1991; Davies, 2000; Gilroy, 1987) and not simply because of exposure to the world wide web. Which is not to say that the idea of the nation, is in any danger of collapse, just that its specific forms are under continuous negotiation. It is this idea of 'the nation' which most represents the concept of community beyond the primordial village.

Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991: 6). This definition is helpful when considering communities in general. He justifies each point in his definition:

"*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined"

"*limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind"

"*sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which the Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. ...nations dream of being free... The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state."

"*community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (ibid.: 6-7)

The freedom of the nation, perhaps more than the nation itself, is the cause for which people have died. The freedom of the capitalist enterprise is similarly the cause for which so many jobs are shed. That is, in both cases, the freedom of some is bought with the demise of others.

The nation, is a paradigmatic form of community. Imagined communities are in this sense cultural artefacts. As are, perhaps, all organisations in which the members cannot know each other directly, that is to say most modern bureaucracies from government departments to the corporations to educational institutions. Within, the latter, there has been a long-standing critique of mass-education that favours smaller class sizes and personal tuition; even traditionalists accept these values, which are enshrined in public schools and Oxbridge colleges. And the radical pedagogy of Freire (1972) and Giroux (1983) builds on this predilection in calling for a more egalitarian exchange between educator and student.

The internet, like the nation, the large organisation, and the community of practice is an imagined community, but this is not to say that it does not exist. As Anderson says: "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991: 6). And 'style' is a property of cultural artefacts of all kinds.

The internet is a cultural artefact, composed of innumerable such artefacts. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1962/1989) traces the emergence of another such cultural artefact. The public sphere, as a category of bourgeois society, is constituted in the institutions that supported the emergence of 'a general reading public'. Reflecting on his earlier work, Habermas (1994) tells us that:

With the growth of a general reading public that transcended the republic of scholars and the urban bourgeoisie and who no longer limited themselves to a careful reading and rereading of a few standard works but oriented their reading habits to an ongoing stream of new publications, there sprang from the midst of the private sphere a relatively dense network of public communication. This growing number of readers ... was complemented by a considerable expansion in the production of books, journals, and papers, an increasing number of authors, publishers, and book sellers, the establishment of lending libraries, reading rooms, and especially reading societies as the social nodes of a literary culture. (Habermas, 1994: 423).

It is easy to imagine parallels between these reading societies and the chat-rooms, MUDs and networked learning spaces of today's internet. Habermas proceeds to argue that these societies and cultural associations were "constituted by the free, that is, private decisions of their founding members, based on voluntary membership, and characterised internally by egalitarian practices of sociability, free discussion, decision by majority, etc." and that they effectively became the "training ground for ... a future society's norms of political equality" (ibid. p.424). For Habermas, it is key that a dense network of public communication arose in the midst of

the private sphere, the exchange of private thoughts and feelings in a new literary culture, centred on the imaginative device of the fictional novel.

It is possible to see the internet of today as the training ground of a future imagined political community, in which personal identity/ies are more fluid, and the range of communities one belongs to and participates in are extremely diverse. The liberalism of the internet makes it possible for people to just be comfortably more fragmented as individuals. Warner (1990) provides a very detailed study of the literary public culture of Republican America in the eighteenth century, which is broadly in line with Habermas (1962/1989). Commenting on this study, Lee (1994: 408) tells us that "the ideal republican would maintain continuity of value, judgement, and reputation between his roles as citizen and private person." Even today this is a governing ethic within the public sphere, which privileges consistency between public opinions and private practices, in politicians and other public figures, for instance.

It is well known that internet chatrooms allow 'players' to vary their identity, to escape their own embodied identities, and that this has potentially emancipatory benefits to those who seek to escape the social inequities relating to various forms of embodiment. Gender, age, race and physical disability are invisible over the internet, granting participants equal access and status within the network (Willson, 2000: 647). However, it is clear that the increasing commercialisation of the net is eroding actual anonymity and hence privacy in cyberspace. Rheingold (1993) points out that search engines compile data on individuals using their services; and those who are 'information poor' are offered 'free time' in exchange for giving up some personal privacy or control over private information (Willson, 2000: 646). Also, Willson suggests that anonymity in certain virtual communities creates chaos through a total lack of accountability; to the extent that in some, such as the WELL, participants must link all "presentations of self with an unchanging referent user-ID" (2000: 648). As she puts this:

The need for a kind of order within community interaction has prompted such communities to sacrifice liberatory aspects of anonymity in favour of accountability. The recording and archiving of interactions also creates the 'historical trace' of a character, decreasing the ability for that character to interact unidentified by past behaviours or statements (ibid.).

Social and political revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depended upon the privacy of the reading societies which nurtured a new imaginary community, without the control of an aristocratic elite, and gave birth to modern nations. These societies for the discussion of fictions and political dreams provided 'networked learning spaces' for people to desire a new world, imagine new communities and then to talk, write and politic them into existence. A classic case of this is the suburban community of Newington Green in late eighteenth century London, where affluent dissenters, for the most part liberal intellectuals and ministers, cultivated new schools and discussion groups attached to churches and new publishing houses, into which the young Mary Wollstonecraft was welcomed and encouraged to write. These learning spaces were 'wild' in the sense of being outside of mainstream educational institutions, like Lave and Wenger's communities of practice, but they were also networked. The community of Newington Green was connected to radical groups in Paris before during and after the French Revolution.

From such networks new national communities were built and older constellations of power and knowledge were undermined and immobilised. The direct participation in communities of political practice, such as Newington Green, through which people like Mary Wollstonecraft acquired their remarkable identities and imagined impossible, unnatural and monstrous communities, by the norms of their day. And we look back on these twists in the trajectory of history with warmth and respect. But to create a sense of community amongst people too numerous to know each other directly and participate directly in the decisions establishing the rules and accountabilities for participation, does not rely on simple biological or social reproduction of persons, identities and their lived-in-world of cultural artefacts. It depends on networks, networks that work and that take work to maintain their nets.

(b) Differences Between Communities of Practice and Actor-Networks

Communities of practice suggest close personal relationships between known personalities who share and participate in the same sort of practice with one another. It is a notion close to the primordial village, the pastoral idyll (Reynolds, 1990). The notion of community, more widely, draws upon this prototypical imagined community and somehow projects from its private world a public sphere (Habermas), characterised, by 'deep horizontal comradeship' (Anderson) which somehow overlooks the divisions of wealth and life chances that fragment the population, by gender, race, class, sheer luck on the pools and numerous other distinctions, to the extent that people band together to fight and die at the hands of a common enemy. How does this come about?

Actor-network theory helps us understand networks by analytically treating human and non-human elements of any network symmetrically. Networks function through force relations and non-humans as well as humans can mobilise these. However, the notion of 'force' is not equated with 'the negative' or the 'power over' others idea, rather its potential for positive use is emphasised i.e. 'power to' achieve, or do this or that (Law, 1991). Force in this sense includes the impersonal notion of resistance, less in the political sense of the French Resistance or resistance to change, and more in the sense of energy in thermo-dynamics, in which every physical object exerts resistance like wind resistance, for example, which can be stronger or weaker depending on the design of a car

or aeroplane, for instance. So with technology in general, from the prosaic to the wondrous. No object exists in a vacuum but all objects interact with other objects around them not only in terms of physical proximity (e.g. the contents of my desk-top include an empty coffee mug, a pile of papers and books, a watch, a clock, a keyboard and so forth) the desk resisting the natural tendency of all of them to fall to the ground, the papers do this job less well and are buckled under the weight of a book. But what makes all of these elements into a network is the necessary role they play in the active production of this paper.

Actor-networks are combinations of technology and humans interacting. They can grow in size and scale, but this does not take place simply in the fevered imagination of a community but it does take place by linking elements of a network. A crucial step in the growth of a network is *problematization* (Callon, 1986) where a set of actors describes a problem in a way which others can identify with and see as their problem too. Wollstonecraft's argument, that women should have exactly the same rights as men, problematised the gendered distribution of rights, inviting other women to see their relative lack of rights as a problem they shared with her. Apart from a close community of like-minded people, most women and men of her generation did not agree with the problematisation as she put it, at least not in public. Brody (1992) tells us that even some of Wollstonecraft's followers, such as Mary Hays, did not dare to publically associate themselves with even the name of Wollstonecraft. Even a century later, Fawcett, the leader of the suffrage movement, who brought out an edition of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was careful to disassociate herself from the morality of Wollstonecraft's personal life, which continued to be regarded as a challenge to conventional sexual morality. Brody tells us that:

Sexual morality for Wollstonecraft was, after all, wholly dependent upon a rational and just social order. She had said that one couldn't call virtuous a 'faithful' wife whose freedom of choice was inhibited by the tyranny of the marriage contract. Similarly, how could one condemn a faithless woman if her education encouraged her to be coquettish, not reasonable (Brody, 1992: 60).

Problematisation does not always work as the problematiser intends. By problematising nearly everything - the whole social order in the *Vindication* - Wollstonecraft's call for a juster world in regard to the rights of women in particular was not really taken up, at least not then. The following century saw the birth of suffrage which called for justice for a narrower circle of women and then in a more circumscribed arena - property relations - than did Wollstonecraft. Such goals were less threatening and even so the networking efforts of the suffrage movement were gargantuan in order to achieve what they did (Brody, 1992).

A further key concept in actor-network theory is *interessement*, a process in which others commit to the problematisation offered (Callon, 1986), accepting the roles proposed for them by the problematisation. Nearly all sales pitches propose a role for the potential customer (sign here, vote for me) which condenses action to a simple gesture which is enough to make a contract or register one's views. The more complicated the role proposed the less likely the take up, the longer the negotiation. The subsequent successes of the suffrage movement often came down to single issue causes where someone just had to sign. For example, women's right to sue for divorce, to own property, of entry to medical school, of the right to be educated at Cambridge, the right to enter various professions which were all achieved by the end of the nineteenth century. All these achievements involved identifying a body, such as a parliament, a professional association, a college, a board of trustees and persuading them to accept a single proposal.

The notion of *enrolment* (Callon, 1986) concerns the enactment of the proposed action as people do what they said they would, either by persuasion, threat, inducement etc. It was one thing to vote for women's right to enter a profession and another thing to accept a particular woman and then to make that possible for her.

However, once many allies have been found on many single issues, it is then possible for some to speak on behalf of a whole movement, to *mobilise* (Callon, 1986) the actions of an entire network, each element of which has its own specific cause at heart, and commitment, to achieve another large step. By 1927 women attained the vote in Britain (1919 in the USA).

The difference between actor networks and communities of practice is not that the former involves work and the latter do not. Communities of practice may be seen as actor networks, they are a case in point, since within them there is work involved in mimicking, demonstrating, practicing together. However, beyond a certain size a community of practice becomes an imagined community. What binds that larger community together are the actor-networks which link and connect multiple communities of practice - Cambridge dons, members of parliament, professional bodies, the suffrage movement. Such communities of practice as these can eventually be connected in a wider claim, a broader proposal for change in the direction of a future imagined community.

Discussion: the Study and Practice of Networked Learning

When we consider networked learning it is easy to see that electronic and telegraphic communication opens up access to conventional education and that cyber-classrooms have the potential to remove the social disadvantages of certain forms of embodiment in regard to participation. It is easy too to draw parallels between the Habermasian idea of an emergent public sphere, springing from the midst of the private sphere in a relatively dense network of public communication, which formed with the growth of a 'general reading public.' One might transpose this idea to a more contemporary idea: the growth of a general interacting public,

and then ask oneself what are the key differences between reading and interacting, if any?

I would like to suggest that there are very few differences in principle. The reading rooms and publishing houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involved both reading and interacting. Both processes work on the model of a sender and receiver. And within communities of practice, senders and receivers are likely to be personally known to each other, which encourages norms of behaviour within the group, even while the group collectively may extend the limits of normality when compared to other groups (as in the case of Newington Green). Networked learning may employ the internet to create virtual reading societies and e.publishing houses and all of this simply transposes to cyberspace social and political forms which are already well known and dominant in our culture.

I would like to argue that networked learning should deliberately focus on the wilder side of the internet, seek to locate the desires and imagined communities out there that find expression only through this technology and not in conventional classrooms, reading societies and the like. To do this, networked learning would connect increasingly with cultural and media studies and the sociology and anthropology of technology. Rather than designing on-line versions of conventional community and communication, we need to locate the vindications of the rights of persons that come to expression only in the midst of the private sphere where through this technology a relatively dense network of public communication is proliferating. Networked learning in the wild, brings us into touch with voices which seem beyond the pale, terrorists, perverts and ideologues, but these voices project and disseminate future imagined political communities which we should be seeking to understand and looking for ways to connect with. The challenge to learning in general is how to make sense of disparate voices and how to settle the claims to different rights of different peoples.

There is a clearly understandable reaction against many such voices and their messages. There is an equally understandable desire amongst powerful vested interests to silence these contemporary dissenters, to control their access and censor their views. Critically reflective networked learning theorists and designers working at the technical and socio-political cutting edge of the media will be interested in the emergence of views that fail to appear through more conventional media. What sort of world do these views point to and how might we educationally and politically operate in cyberspace to engage with these voices and their arguments.

Conclusion

Networked learning opens a door to a new politics of education. The old politics of education concerned the rights of access granted to people of all social categories within the polity and public sphere of the nation state. This was a politics in which open and distance learning technology frequently sided with the arguments in favour of widening access as wide as possible. The net has opened a world of discussion beyond the classroom - face to face or virtual. In the chatrooms of this new imagined political community there is a privacy of opinion and a new politics of voice and identity.

Networked learning can either continue as an auxiliary, a cyber-annex, to the 'teaching machine' (Spivak, 1993) or it can engage with the networks of learning beyond; which are undoubtedly forming the political community of the future. To accommodate Wollstonecraft's heirs, the teaching machine has only slowly set up departments of Women's Studies and Gender Studies and more. The teaching machine changes very slowly. Networked learning theorists need to grapple with the new educational politics which the net has opened up. Wherever they go next, the rest of the machine is likely to follow.

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Network Learning and Ideas of Community

Vivien Hodgson and Michael Reynolds

ABSTRACT

In the paper we will critique the idea of community and the way it is applied in higher education and networked learning in particular. The paper will examine the notions of community that underlie participative approaches to education including tendencies to conformity and exclusion and explore how networked learning offers wider possibilities for belonging to multiple communities.

Keywords

Community, exclusion, inclusion, shifting communities, participative learning

INTRODUCTION

The argument of this paper is that Networked Learning offers a more promising medium for supporting participative approaches to learning than more traditional media. Specifically, that networked learning facilitates participative and democratic values in education because it allows for the emergence of subgroups and 'splinter' groups based on differences or different interests. Traditionally, participate approaches, whether intentionally or otherwise, tend to reflect notions of collaboration based on a discourse of community which discourage recognition of differences. Advocates of networked learning would seem for the most part to share in a collaborative discourse and the potential of NL to support less consensus driven approaches to learning do not seem to have been realised in theory, let alone in practice.

After summarising the various critiques of community in education, the paper outlines a counter-proposition of multiple or shifting communities as being a more appropriate concept for providing a platform for education based on democratic values. We then review propositions for and examples of networked learning in practice which aim to incorporate a concept of community which is not limited by the more familiar assumptions of consensus.

CRITIQUE OF COMMUNITY

There is a strong tradition within Networked Learning theory and practice for collaboration and democratic values. Ideas about the potential of computer mediated communication to support what Simeon Yates (1997) recently referred to as 'the democratic theory' of CMC (computer mediated communication) can be traced to numerous writers such as Sproull and Kiesler (1991, 1992) writing on the impact for democratisation within organisations, Boyd (1987) and Boshier (1990) on the potential of CMC to emancipate educational processes. Even earlier, Hiltz and Turoff (1978) commented on the potential of CMC for leveling out hierarchical power differentials amongst networked individuals.

More recently Ng (2001), commenting on the idea of on-line communities refers to the potential for a 'collaborative learning experience' but only if 'participants can relate to one another, and share a sense of community and a common goal'. In the same vein Garrison (1997) writes of CMC that 'meaning is constructed in an interactive community of learners' (p.10) and as Mynatt et al (1998) observe 'the promise of networked computational devices for collaboration and community-building is compelling'. As Kenway recently commented in her thought provoking discussion of ideas about the way individuals relate and construct identities on the Internet

Community is a key concept _____ While it is far-fetched to talk of the Internet as a community rather than a collection of disparate communities and while it certainly is not global in the true sense of the word, the Internet does accommodate many different sets of interests and some believe that there is at least a community ethic (Kenway, 2001).

With the exception of Kenway, who explores both the 'utopian' and 'dystopian' perspectives of Internet communities, these examples for the most part reflect the more wide spread tendency in liberal education to privilege community as a core value.

The concept of community is used to convey different meanings, including those of *locality*, *social activity* or as *social structure* (Clark, 1973), indicating either where people live, how they live, or ways in which they might be distinguished from other groupings. Underlying participative or democratic interpretations of educational practice there is usually, to use Clark's term, the notion of community as *sentiment*, conveying a sense of solidarity and of significance, of individuals belonging to and in some way contributing to the whole so as to derive a sense of self worth (1973:409). The idea of community is invariably used normatively so

that while it might be difficult to be sure of its precise meaning it signifies values and practices which are unquestionably and morally desirable.

In a similar vein the extensive literature on virtual communities frequently refers to the pre-existing need for community formation. There is also a debate as to whether "virtual communities" imply the emergence of a new culture, and ways of being or whether these communities are technological artefacts, simply projections of existing forms of communication, identity representation and values. (see Asensio and Hodgson 2002 for a full discussion on this debate). In the claim that the Internet is a culture in itself, the emphasis is on the way communities are created as cultures within virtual environments (see for example Kenway, 2001). Rheingold's definition of virtual community is an example of this perspective; he defines a virtual community as;

" social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"
(1993:5).

The other claim is that the Internet is a cultural artefact and the emphasis is on virtual communities as an extension of existing social practices and patterns of interaction. There has been much written from this perspective which in many ways echoes Giddens' understanding of time and space in the modern world. Giddens notes that our concepts of time and space have changed dramatically in recent years. Whilst the relationship of people to time and space in the contemporary social world differs from that of earlier societies we nonetheless continue to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space (Giddens, 1984). A.R. Stone (1995) in her widely acclaimed book 'The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age' explores similar ideas and issues in relation to new technology. It could be said however, that Stone and indeed Turkle in her book 'Life on the Screen; identity in the age of the Internet' (Turkle, S. 1996) focus more on multiple identities than on multiple and/or shifting communities which is our intended focus.

It could be argued that the emphasis on 'community' generally within adult and higher education can be seen as a reaction to an exaggerated emphasis on individual autonomy and as a wish to counter the alienation and social fragmentation which it is feared will result from it. Noddings, (1996) has written of the perpetuation of the myth of the 'presocial', autonomous individual, and the preoccupation with individual rights and consequent neglect of alternative values associated with social responsibility and community as having eroded 'our understanding of human sociality' (1996: 252). As such community offers a less individualistic alternative and its appeal is in offering a conception of self in which who we are is defined by the community in whose beliefs, desires and goals we share (Young, 1986).

Similar responses to individualistic perspectives can be seen in the ideas and practices of adult educators who have developed participative approaches to learning. Collective projects and groupwork are proposed as an alternative to more hierarchical methods, providing a means of developing both individuals' capabilities and for working in harmony with others. Collins (1991) for example, in his account of education as 'transformative', advocates that 'pedagogical strategies should be adopted that foster collective decision-making and solidarity among students'. In our own field of management education the emphasis on community is also to some extent a response to a predominantly individualizing ethos. Experiential learning, assessment centres, the incorporation of techniques from the 'personal growth' movement and slogans of 'empowerment' and 'competitive advantage' are familiar manifestations of this ethos.

The values of community offer an alternative to more individualistic approaches are reflected in groupwork and its application to 'team development', and perhaps most clearly in the 'learning community'. The learning community is participative in that as well as sharing ideas, tutors and students take joint responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating its detailed design, content and direction (Pedler, 1994, Reynolds, 1997). Interest in Habermas and critical theory within management education (Roberts, 1996) and adult education (Hart, 1992) as well as within technology supported learning have introduced similar values of community, albeit within a more critically reflective ethos. Roberts for example has written of 'the formation of group culture and the possibilities of consensus grounded in dialogue (1996: 70).

The idea of community is equally established in the recent interest in concepts such as 'situated learning' and 'communities of practice' which appear to offer prospects for reframing learning in less individualized, more socially inclined perspectives. But here too, as Fielding's (1997) critique in the context of organisational learning clearly demonstrates, the concept of community can be used unquestioningly and normatively as 'a good thing' as illustrated in the following quotations:

Each of us gives up our own certainty and recognizes our interdependence with the larger community of practitioners. (Kofman and Senge, 1993: 21)

[communities are] defined by their centres of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of the *we* from a collection of *I's*.

(Sergiovanni, 1994:217)

These examples for the most part then can be seen to adopt consensus-based interpretations of community, although there are notable exceptions to this as in Gherardi et al's (1998) account of 'communities of practice' where they are at pains to point out that:

In our view, communities of practice are just one of the forms of organizing: it is not the consensual dimension, or the sense of harmony or closeness which identifies them, as much as the fact that they support the carrying out and perpetuation of a practice (p. 278)

Community as hierarchy

The problem then with incorporating the idea of community into educational practice is that the idealised interpretation we have described ignores its darker side. The question for educators seeking to reflect democratic values in the structure of their programmes is whether the concept of community as commonly applied is either realistic or desirable. So for example, Smith (1988) in her critique of the conception of community argues

...at any given time as well as over the course of anyone's life history, *each of us* is a member of many, shifting communities, *each* of which establishes, for each of its members, multiple social identities, multiple principles of identification with other people, and, accordingly, a collage or grab-bag of allegiances, beliefs, and sets of motives (1988: 168, author's emphasis).

Similarly, Fielding (1997) has underlined the inadequate attention to asymmetries of power in applications of the idea of community to an organizational context. Fielding points out that the protagonists of the learning organization fail 'to locate the learning organization project within a reality which is socially, politically and historically contested' (1997: 17).

But of equal concern is that idealised concepts of community discount the expectations of loyalty which attend them and which result in pressure to conform on individual subservience, through pressures to conform to some accepted set of beliefs and practices. As Giddens (1994) points out:

Those who think of 'community' only in a positive sense should remember the intrinsic limitations of such an order. Traditional communities can be, and normally have been, oppressive. Community in the form of mechanical solidarity crushes individual autonomy and exerts a compelling pressure towards conformism. (p126).

To be a member of a community usually entails subjugation to its core values and norms of behavior and to deviate from these in resisting assimilation is to run the risk of becoming marginalized in order that the integrity of the community is preserved. 'Normocentricity' is thus enforced and dissent outlawed (Noddings, 1996:254). This is just as much the case in education, especially in participative approaches in which a less structured approach in which students and tutors share in making choices and decisions, involves them in more engaged relationships than would be expected in conventional pedagogies. As a likely consequence differences, whether structural or which arise from preferred ways of working can result in some students becoming isolated and marginalised. In the same way, subgroups which do form can function as safe havens for minority groups, offending the sensibilities of those for whom the values of collaboration and community carry greater weight (see Reynolds and Trehan, 2001 for a fuller account of these observations in relation to the practice of the 'learning community'). Indeed, practices of exclusion, enforced coherence around a set of values which reflect the wishes of dominant factions and associated systems of control, indoctrination and social discrimination seem to Hirsch (1986) the inevitable if 'morally abhorrent' consequences of the conditions necessary to maintain traditional values of community (p. 423).

Networked Learning is just as prone to consensus perspectives. Witness this extract from Mynatt et al (1998) who in describing 'defining features' of community recommend that

These relations become a mutual source of orientation and definition of what's appropriate and what's not – that is, they begin to establish the terms of social responsibility and expectations within the community (p. 128)

These criticisms of community have become emphasised through postmodern concerns for 'Other' and have in turn resulted in hostility to the idea of community because of its inherent denial of difference and the devaluing of those excluded by it. There it seems, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of the importance to the learning process of joining a knowledge community and becoming able to converse in it (Bruffee 1993) and, on the other hand, the increasing acceptance of how knowledge communities define rules of exclusion, set boundaries and impose closure (Usher, 2001). As an alternative, social theorists such as Young (1986) have proposed the development of a 'politics of difference' as the preferable alternative to 'community' and it is this alternative theoretical perspective which we see networked learning as having the capability of converting into educational practice.

FROM COMMUNITY TO A 'PEDAGOGY OF DIFFERENCE'

Participative education methods have in various ways attempted to reflect alternative, less hierarchical ways of working and learning, based on more democratic values - including those of community. Critics of community have, as we have outlined, emphasized its limitations in relation to difference, the oppressive aspects of conformity, and the obstacles to participation given inevitable inequalities and conflicts of interest.

Ideas which counter simplistic interpretations of 'community' have been expressed in a number of ways a common feature of which is the notion that as members of society, each of us belongs to overlapping and sometimes changing, 'social positions', if only because of membership in a number of 'non-voluntary' groupings - class, gender, race and age (Fisk, 1993). Furthermore, from the perspective of membership of 'sub-communities' it follows that the needs of any single group should not be imposed on the entire population. Giddens' (1994) proposal of *cosmopolitanism* is based on the notion of 'dialogic democracy' which assumes that people live in 'intelligent relationship' with one another (p131), tolerating differences that are not always resolvable by 'creating active trust through an appreciation of the integrity of the other' (p116). Similarly, the radical educationalist Giroux (1992) replaces the traditional view of community with one which is characterized by 'a multiplicity of democratic practice, values and social relations' (p.134).

A further question to be addressed in the idea of multiple communities is whether there can be any debate across differences, and for this to be possible say, in the interests of learning, would there have to be some form of shared commitment to an overarching or common interest. Fisk (1993) for example, proposes the idea of a 'procedural community' where there is general acceptance of democratic procedure which coexists with substantive conflicts (p.602). This proposal however, would need to take account of the difficulties in participating in the presence of inequalities and of the possibility that it becomes a more disingenuous means of obscuring differences. In a similar spirit Ellsworth (1989) is critical of idealistic proposals for dialogue which take insufficient account of inequalities - as for example between tutors and students and accompanying 'dynamics of subordination' (p.315). This reservation must apply to other hierarchical relationships which emerge on the basis of differences between students also.

A more realistic proposition is that subcommunities are places that provide the support needed to bring issues into the public arena where controversy and disputes can be voiced. The concept of dialogue which emerges from this perspective is not limited to or primarily that of 'sharing' and certainly not of reconciliation, but allows for 'defiant speech', of 'talking back', of confronting the 'contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation [and] ideology' (Ellsworth, 1989: 312).

Iris Young (1986) has applied the metaphor of 'city life' as more likely to support the recognition and maintenance of difference. Using this metaphor could equally provide an alternative foundation for educational design, so that differences and ambiguity would become accepted without an expectation that they should somehow be resolved and resisting their becoming used as grounds for exclusion. Young's point is that in the city people's experience of each other very much involves difference, and in ways they cannot pretend to entirely understand. Young draws this contrast between city life and the concept of community:

City life implies a social inexhaustibility quite different from the ideal of the face-to-face community in which there is mutual understanding and group identification and loyalty. The city consists in a great diversity of people and groups, with a multitude of subcultures and differentiated activities and functions, whose lives and movements mingle and overlap in public spaces. People belong to distinct groups or cultures, and interact in neighbourhoods and workplaces. They venture out from these locales, however, to public places of entertainment, consumption and politics. They witness one another's cultures and functions in such interaction, without adopting them as their own. (1986: 21)

Similarly, Fraser (1994) argues that participation is more likely to be achieved on the basis of a 'plurality of competing publics' than on the basis of any single public forum. This it seems to us is a feature of online learning environments in that they make it possible to leave behind the notion of a single public forum and entertain the possibility to participate in and interact in both private and public forums at the same time.

To restate the theme of this paper, if pedagogy, virtual or otherwise, is to reflect less hierarchical, more participative principles, it should also avoid the more coercive characteristics of 'community'. It might therefore be expected to have as pivotal the following features:

The structure and design of the course will support recognition of differences which emerge rather than contribute to their avoidance or suppression.

Differences of values, circumstance, belief, role or interest will be central to the life and learning of the participants;

These differences will be the basis of, and provide support for, multiple (and changing) sub-communities;

Such differences will be the focus for understanding, debate and dispute - rather than become targets for assimilation, reconciliation or the grounds of marginalizing minority interests.

Given the strength of the rhetoric of cooperation, collaboration and community in the domain of networked learning, it is worth reasserting that a pedagogy which claims to be democratic would contrast significantly with mainstream theory and practice in the importance it would attach to difference. In this way a (virtual) pedagogy of difference would be readily distinguishable from the individualistic discourses associated with student-centred or experiential approaches to learning.

The basis of such a pedagogy can be found for example in Grey and French's proposal for a 'more 'dialectical' style of pluralism' (1996:10) and in the same volume Collin refers to a programme as a 'site of intersecting and interacting discourses' (1996:147). Similarly, Grey et al emphasize the importance of learning how social constructions of reality and the self 'involve exercises of power which produce and reproduce inequality' (1996:105). These examples offer a different perspective from educational designs preoccupied with pedagogical interpretations based on the traditional values of community.

Ellsworth (1989) provides an illustration of subcommunities in practice. In the programme she describes, a result of students' awareness that some subgroups on the programme were getting more speaking-time than others, 'informal, overlapping affinity groups formed and met unofficially for the purpose of articulating and refining positions based on shared oppressions, ideological analyses, or interests' (p317). The social structure of the course which evolved was close to the metaphor of 'city life' described earlier. Affinity groups provided a place for common interest and support, and a base from which to engage with the larger group. As Ellsworth reports, the task came to be seen not as accomplishing democratic relations between the *individuals* in the group

but of building a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom. (1989:317).

A similar pattern *can* emerge in using the 'learning community'. As described earlier in this paper, the learning community provides an opportunity for participants to choose content, method of approach, and group membership. Another key aspect of this design is a periodic review in which tutors and participants reflect on their experience of the learning community as it develops. The usual forum for this – evoking the traditional notion of community – is a face-to-face meeting of all the students and tutors. This can work well as a forum for review, but it is undoubtedly vulnerable to pressures to conformity, inequality of opportunity to contribute and the risks of less powerful individuals or groups becoming marginalized, all features which critics of community have emphasized. But occasionally, the public forum seems to 'fail' and some members of the learning community choose not to attend it. Informal groups meet in libraries or workrooms, go for walks or eat out. What has developed here might be thought of as a 'healthy' (as in 'multiple') community rather than as a 'failed' community. As already stated the new feature that online learning brings to these ideas is the possibility for such forums to co-exist and allow for both kinds of groupings at the same time.

APPLYING THE IDEA OF MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES TO NETWORKED LEARNING

If the aim is for a course design to provide opportunities for groups to form, dissolve or re-form with the added possibility of varying membership based on difference of interests, preferences or purposes, then as Matthews (1997:4) proposed, computer conferencing should provide the means of creating on-line a plurality of 'publics and counter-publics' (p.4). Strike (2000) conjures up a picture of on-line learning to which the metaphor of 'city life' might apply:

We must recognise the possibility of durable and serious disagreement over substantive matters and that this disagreement will tend to dissolve community or generate a tyranny of the majority (p. 623)

Strike's observation fits exactly the possibility that an on-line 'community' will have to work with emergent differences and that the response to these will be either to recognise and respect them or to 'manage' them in some way - by suppression or concealment. What educational structure can be designed and facilitated which will acknowledge differences? What examples of this can be found can be found in practice?

Sharrock and Butlon (1997), in observing how much consensus values feature in CSCW have questioned its practicality. Similar to authors we have featured in this paper Sharrock and Butlon are critical of the assumption of non-coercive communication which they see as underpinning propositions for collaborative work. But their concern seems limited to such aspects as honesty, sincerity and to following through commitments and whether it is realistic to think that GroupWare systems can cater for these aspects of collaborative work. Savagnac and Falzon (1996) are critical of idealism in propositions for CSCW. They point out that there are two dimensions which are neglected, the first being that participants are presented as if 'ideally cooperative, and the second that 'everything happens as if the only motivation of the actors was to obtain the task objective' (p.251). These observations at least suggest disquiet within the CSCW domain with idealised notions of collaboration. And it is clear from NL accounts that for the most part even when the idea for subgroups is evident, the emphasis is still on consensus as the norm (see for example Mynatt et al 1998).

An example of an application which seems closest to being able to accommodate the idea of 'city life' is the one described by O'Day and colleagues (1998) who adapted an online system for 600 active participants - researchers, teachers, students and administrators - in an elementary school project in Phoenix, Arizona. This was designed to support participants in individual and group projects. The mainstay of the system was a provision for 'channels' which took advantage 'of people's ability to participate in multiple, simultaneous, group conversations' (p. 325). The authors describe the way in which participants 'advertise *private* channels to small selected groups and *public* channels to the community as a whole' (p.325, our emphasis). This would seem to encourage the online facility to subgroups to meet and work together without involving the whole community.

Arguably, contrary to the majority of current online educational communities, the concepts of city life and shifting communities requires larger numbers of learner involvement than is currently the norm. And in addition, greater levels of fluidity and possibilities for shifting communities to develop than is currently allowed for in particularly larger educational based communities where the received wisdom tends to be towards tighter controls and structure in order for the community to operate effectively.

CONCLUSION

Our proposal is that on-line work in education offers the prospect of structures that can facilitate multiple communities as a way of recognising differences. To this extent we align ourselves with other colleagues in search of participative designs that support and reinforce democratic values. Where we depart from this tradition is in doubting the efficacy of models based on consensus driven models of collaboration, co-operation and community. What seems still to be realised is a way of translating the concept of democracy based on multiple communities into practice. We look forward in learning of examples in practice because our guess is that the obstacle to such development is not due to any limitation in the technology so much as the way consensus-bound discourses dominate participative practices in adult and higher education. For as Kolb (2000) observes

Quiet places online are possible, and would be very valuable. But we also need busy yet educational places, and places that encourage deconstructive moves that foreground the process of inhabiting and being online, making this available for critical awareness and revision (p132).

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Walk on by: anarchist possibilities for the reconceptualisation of the virtual community

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we turn to feminist and anarchist literature ENRfu(Miller 1970; Ward 1973; Kropotkin 1974; Marshall 1993) in order to reconsider the issue of representation within communities. Post-structuralist feminists have long questioned the unproblematic notion of women's identity within the wider category of 'woman', either because the self is experienced as fragmentary

(e.g. Griffiths 1995) or because the category 'woman' is a linguistic construct (Moi 1993; Butler 1997). We add to this the rejection by anarchist theory of the idea that one person can ever 'represent' another (May 1994). In other words individual autonomy is always privileged even within collective endeavours. In this paper we explore how these ideas might inform our thinking about group learning processes arguing that there is a need for a carefully considered ethical basis for those involved in group learning, one that can accommodate a wider range of individual differences and a sense of cohesion and belonging not based on exclusivity, a narrow 'us' as opposed to 'them' (Rorty 1989).

Keywords

Groups, post-structuralist feminism, anarchism, identity, politics

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we seek to unite two of our theoretical interests – an interest in how individuals are represented (in terms of their identity) and represented (in terms of the dynamics of collective membership) in the context of their involvement in groups. In this instance we are particularly interested in how these 'problems' of representation are worked out in relation to learning communities. We use two complementary theoretical perspectives to unpick some of the Utopian assumptions implicit in the use of community models of learning. We use ideas from feminism and post-structuralist feminism in particular to look at the problems of representation of identity and anarchist theory to critique the idea of collective representation of individual interests. Both theoretical approaches have a tradition of being suspicious of the way in which social norms suppress individual difference and we want to both continue this instinctive mistrust of representation and to apply it to learning networks of all varieties.

We start the paper with a consideration of ideas of representation *within* groups – looking from the individual's perspective back out to the group and in the second half of the paper we mirror this process by looking from the group back to the individual. Psychology has provided us with quite limiting ways of thinking about group membership and participation. Allport commented in the 1920's that there was no psychology of groups that wasn't essentially a psychology of the individual (Brown 2001) and this position has changed little in the years since. This reductionist view has remained dominant despite challenges, and it does pose problems when we think about how people interact with communities, not just specifically communities of learners. There is a clear implication that people 'consent' to take on group norms when joining groups and that that despite this their own performance of identity remains unchanged. For example, Brown states

"...in defining themselves as a member of a particular group people also typically associate themselves with the various common attributes and norms that they see as being part and parcel of that group. So, not only do individuals see members of other groups in stereotyped ways, they also see themselves as being relatively interchangeable with others in their own group..." (2001: 7)

If we were willing to use feminist post-structuralist theory to challenge these ideas of consensual interchangeable identities what debates about learning communities would become possible? Would it result in mere critique, or provide a vocabulary with which to voice some persistent discomfort with the often normative role played by community in these contexts or might it even result in a new politics of the community?

In a similar fashion, anarchism is deeply sceptical of an individualist 'contractual' (or perhaps 'consumerist') model of group membership, where members freely and consciously negotiate trade-offs, suppressing the pursuit of some desires in order to achieve others, but remaining essentially unchanged by their encounters with others. For one thing, anarchism rejects completely the necessity to bargain away parts of our 'self' in this way, but it also suggests that more is going on in groups than individual trading. Rather membership involves (or should involve) an imaginative identification with the details of the lives and desires of others (Rorty, 1989). In this engagement new possibilities for identity may be opened up. Likewise, and less positively, there are also possibilities that individuals are forced to behave in-authentically by having to deny aspects of themselves that they feel are important because of power asymmetries within the group. In other words, "the self is itself at stake" in group membership (Sandel, 1992) The contribution of anarchism to evaluating the prospects of either enabling or limiting memberships arises from its long struggle to reconcile its twin commitments to both communitarianism and individual autonomy. The discussion of anarchism below expands on these ideas, but also discusses the preconditions most anarchists would argue are necessary in order for communities to function in an enabling rather than an oppressive way. We argue that just as post-structuralist feminism acts to sensitize us to the micro-political processes within groups so these anarchist preconditions alert us to the limiting and potentially oppressive foundations upon which most 'learning communities' are constructed.

We hope our paper contributes to a challenging discussion about the foundations of ideas of community in education and believe that this is necessary because of the rather uncritical way in which the 'learning community' (and by extension the virtual community, which we would argue is essentially little different in its micro-politics and institutional foundations to other learning groups) is rhetorically deployed. After all the adoption of the term 'community' at all carries with it positive connotations that deserve to be scrutinised. Although we have found it difficult, as Braidotti (2001) has foreseen, to think about process and to find

our own way of representing the ways in which these ideas interconnect, nevertheless we still believe that both perspectives can contribute to our aim of using this discussion as a way of generating an ‘ethics of the learning community’ and we hope discussion following this group of papers will help us in exploring this idea further.

Subjectivity and learning communities

If we are to explore the difficult subject of how identity is negotiated in respect of online learning communities then perhaps it is useful to start with the wider contemporary interest in the issue. For although post-structuralism and feminism have made subjectivity a central part of their theorizing, identity has been subject to scrutiny across a wide range of the humanities and social sciences.

Holstein and Gubrium call the story of the self and of identity a ‘blockbuster’ in the social science genre (2000: 17) and Hall comments that identity has caused a ‘discursive explosion’ (1998:1). From psychology (e.g. Cushman 1990) through cultural studies (e.g. Sarup 1998) and on to organisation studies (du Gay, 1996) identity has been of intense interest to theorists. What the theorists seem to want to stress is that our present day understandings of the concept of identity represents a break from previous conceptions and most often as a break from the Cartesian cogito. Cushman (1990) uses an economic and historical trajectory of the self to show how identity and how we treat it has changed. Sarup (1998) also believes that we have reached a point in our history of the self where we have a proliferation of identities as a result of our economic and social mobility – we have ended up as people who do many things in quite different places and contexts. We, the one, have become many.

Giddens (1999) explores this feature of our high-modern/late-modern/post-modern/post-industrial age – the idea of identity being crafted and shaped and controlled in a thoroughly conscious manner. We are all acting as some sort of project manager of the self in a never-ending reflexive construction site of subjectivity. This construction project cannot be separated from our society of abundance. The consumption of cultural and semiotic goods and the ability this gives to affluent, Western individuals to style themselves in transient and meaningful/meaningless ways is at the heart of the reflexive identity project (Perriton 2000). Indeed Lury has labeled this version of the human being as *homo faber* (1998: 19) – the experimenter. What was previously naturally or socially constructed is no longer a ‘given’ instead it is a matter of choice that can be technologically assisted (Lury 1998).

Feminists have been quick to adopt *homo faber* – recognizing that the concept still allows a grounding of politics within experience and yet enables the feminist subject to be ‘up to date’ in relation to developments in identity theory.

"The underlying assumption of the newer version [of gender identity politics] is that a self is made and makes itself in the changing circumstances in which she lives, and in a direction strongly affected by her own understanding of herself" (Griffiths, 1995, pp. 78-79)

The interplay of technology and feminist subjectivities has spawned a number of alternative ‘figurations’ (Braidotti, 2002). The adoption of technological identities (biological she becoming he online and vice versa), avatars, cyborgs and technological prosthetics is a fascinating area in its own right. However, in this paper we want to move beyond the idea that subjectivity is an act of free will and consumer choice and into different theoretical territory.

As noted above the ‘new’ identity politics envisaged by Griffiths do not preclude the idea of an individual woman – through the exercise of her free will – from making choices about identity and participation in identities shared with others. Keeping the individual humanist subject ‘in charge’ of their identity allows psychology, as a field of study, to remain relatively untouched by the changing conception of identity. Therefore the assumptions about how individuals negotiate and consent to group identities, values and norms also remain unchanged. This in turn allows fairly comforting and pastoral conceptions (Reynolds 2000) of learning communities – online or otherwise – to flourish and to remain unchallenged.

What is needed for the debate on learning communities to open up is a theory of identity that treats identity as relatively unstable over time, its interpretation largely outside of the exercise of the subject’s will and, as a result, where an individual’s entry and existence within a sequestered social group is complex and contradictory.

Post-structuralist theory provides us with just that vision of the individual subject and of subjectivity as ‘precarious, contradictory and in process’ (Weedon, 1993:33). But it cannot provide all of what we need. Although post-structuralism establishes that the subject is historically produced it is feminist post-structuralism that adds the sense of the subject being a site where conflict is continually being played out. The *political* significance of abandoning a belief in an essential subjectivity is that subjectivity then becomes open to change (Weedon, 1993).

But if subjectivity is open to the inscription of society on a wider level, then it is also wide open to inscription from the smaller sub-groupings that it enters into. As such an individual’s entry into a learning community is not an act where it can be said that the individual is voluntarily entering or negotiating membership of the norms and values of that group. It becomes equally a place where

identity is inscribed and proscribed. Identity in a group setting of any sort therefore becomes the 'gift' of the 'conflicting and contradictory' (Weedon, 1993: 34) social discourses operating within the group.

How might this change our view of participation and communication within learning communities? It could be argued that individuals understand the social discourses that are in play when they enter a learning community, or that they are a learning community because they already share a discourse of practice, values or beliefs. Yet we should be wary of such assumptions as Reynolds and Trehan's (forthcoming) paper on the range and depth of subject positions rejected by participants on such a learning programme shows. The shock at these 'interpolations' (Butler 1997) is evident in the participant's accounts of their experiences and should alert us to the paradox of the co-existence of hyper-individuality and social normativity (Braidotti, 2002). Clearly there are always elements within a learning community that are outside of the idea of consent and that these are reacted to, even if they are not always articulated.

We therefore seem to have two broad options when considering how feminist ideas about subjectivity could be figured into a debate about the micro-processes of learning communities. If individuals are free to alter their identity in line with their desires then the issue becomes one of accommodating and exploiting the potential of different styles of participation (not only between different individuals but within individual members). And the other option is to consider how the learning community creates, bestows and controls the subjectivity of its members in ways that are quite different to the voluntarist, communitarian perspectives on educational communities.

What we are aware of in our argument to date is that this picture of participation in learning communities privileges the desires of the individual. In the first conception it is the individual who creates and asserts their choice of identity within the group setting, and in the second it is implied that individual desires or identities are curbed and obscured by normative discourses. The idea of consent has been raised also – all with the clear implication that a 'good' alternative learning community would seek to promote and gain creative power from identity mutations and would surface social discourses that limited the opportunity for identities to proliferate. That would be an unfortunate place to leave the argument if indeed the aim of this symposium is to be provocative in our ideas about communities.

Braidotti's idea of subjectivity as an interplay of desire and power does suggest a way in which we could refigure the debate in order to remove the automatic valorization of the free play individual subjectivity.

"Power is negative (*potestas*) in that it prohibits and constrains. It is also positive (*potentia*) in that it empowers and enables. The constant negotiation between the two poles of power can also be formulated in political terms in the notion of subjectivity as power and desire. This view posits the subject as a term in a process, which is co-extensive with both power and resistance to it" (Braidotti, 2002: 21, emphasis in the original)

The learning community may be involved in a constant process of monitoring, speaking about and lessening the impact of *potestas* to the benefit of *potentia*. But there is also an argument that suggests that a learning community may also wish to knowingly discipline and constrain *potentia* by invoking *potestas*, in order to create communities and explore the idea of collective desires. The automatic assumption of individual freedom = emancipation is one that would have to be open to debate in this model, and offers quite radically different conceptions of the role and worth of difference in groups. In addition its concerns with the ethics of learning communities would be at the level of the micro-processes. We return to more specific issues connected with ethics in the conclusion but the next section of the paper will deal with a macro level analysis of individualism and how it interacts with ideas of community.

Anarchism and the learning community

Anarchism is something of a suppressed political and social philosophy, attracting a fair degree of ridicule and suspicion from all sides of the political spectrum, although right-wing libertarians are attracted by the emphasis on individual autonomy and link this to the free market and minimal state (Nozick 1980). However, anarchist thought may have something to offer in reconceptualising 'learning communities' and pose worthwhile questions concerning whether communities mediated by information technology offer any inherent advantages or simply pose the same ethical problems as any other institutionalised community. It needs to be borne in mind that anarchism is by its nature a heterodox tradition and it might be more precise to talk of 'anarchisms'. However, the outline of anarchist thinking below attempts to describe ideas that most, if not all, anarchists would feel able to assent to.

Anarchism places a pre-eminent value on individual autonomy, with most anarchists believing that no individual should be forced in any way to conform to collective norms or decisions. (Woodcock 1963; Marshall 1993). Indeed, anarchists from the time of Kropotkin have extended this rejection of the principles of authority and hierarchy to that of representation: "we refuse to assume a right which moralists have always taken upon themselves to claim, that of mutilating the individual in the name of some ideal." (Kropotkin 1970:105). Representation in this sense extends from the political into the ethical, social and psychological. To give people images of who they are or should be damages their ability to decide this for themselves (May 1994). Anarchism's awareness of the potentially oppressive effects of a limited and limiting choice of possibilities for identity, backed by various forms of political

and moral authority is a close point of contact with poststructuralist and feminist theory.

Likewise the rejection of the principle of hierarchy in anarchism goes beyond the obvious and extends into looking beyond a top-down, centralised understanding of the operation of power and recognises the need to "widen the field of politics" (May 1994: 50). "The picture of power and struggle that emerges in the anarchist perspective is one of intersecting networks of power rather than of hierarchy" (Ward 1973: 26). Thus anarchist praxis entails resistance occurring at multiple sites in diverse ways for local results, rather than seeking to sever the head of the body politic and replace it with another. "There is no final struggle, only a series of partisan struggles on a variety of fronts." (Ward 1973: 26).

Despite the privileging of individual autonomy and a complete rejection of authority and hierarchy, anarchism is also strongly communitarian. Even the most individualistic of anarchist thinkers, Max Stirner, still envisaged a loose 'union of egotists' as an essential social form in his ideal society (Woodcock 1963). Anarchists such as Kropotkin, Bakunin, Tolstoy, and Ghandi all drew inspiration from peasant or craftsmen's communes as already possessing many of the features of the ideal anarchist society, where such communes would be linked to others by loose federations. For example, Kropotkin writes admiringly of the Russian peasant 'obshchina' as a utopian model. (Kropotkin 1873) However, Kropotkin develops this idea further, so that the commune is no longer a geographically bounded traditional ascriptive community but "a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals, knowing neither frontiers nor walls. The social commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined whole. Each group of the commune will necessarily be drawn towards other similar groups in other communes; it will be grouped and federated with them by links as solid as those which attach it to its fellow citizens, and will constitute a commune of interests whose members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages." (Kropotkin cited in Marshall 1993: 326). Now it might be argued that Kropotkin's vision of multiple memberships of various communities of interest, or 'practice' to extend the concept to the learning community (Lave and Wenger 1991), with its promise of freedom from the ascriptive features of traditional communities (Durkheim 1973) and the possibility of what Rorty (1989) has referred to as 'idiosyncratic projects of the self', is now achievable with the advent of modern communications and information technology. For this technology enables access to and communication with a wider range of individuals than ever before and it does not suffer the limitations previously imposed by location and to an extent, time.

However, before we get too carried away by this utopian euphoria, there are real problems with identifying ideal communities within which individuals both enjoy autonomy and belonging, and learning communities, including virtual ones, which are constructed as a part of the activities of academic or corporate institutions. Firstly, whilst anarchists might be (and have been) characterised as being mad, they are not stupid. A central and continuing debate within anarchism is how to balance the tensions inherent in maintaining a community and ensuring complete individual autonomy. Anarchism has struggled more openly than most utopian mentalities with the problems of the regulation of behaviour. In a society where no individual can be bound by rules, how does one deal with individuals whose choices result in harm to others or whose behaviour limits the choices that others can make? Anarchists tend to assume that with the distorting effects of hierarchy and inequality removed there will be much less cause of such behaviour, but recognise that conflict and unruly passions are an ineradicable element of the human condition. However, prescriptive or institutionalised means of deterring or punishing violence, abuse, and other forms of anti-social behaviour, or to ensure conformance to rules and procedures, are generally believed to make the effects of such behaviour more damaging than doing nothing, or rather allowing the individuals concerned to work these things through with each other.

As well as minimising such problems by the removal of all forms of personal and institutional authority, various more positive and collective ways of dealing with such problems have been suggested, including 'leaving alone', community juries, ejection from the community, or the influence of community norms and disapproval. The problems with all of these are all frequently discussed within anarchist debates (Marshall, 1993), and the issues raised are often similar to the micro-political ones raised by post-structuralist feminists (May, 1994) although, perhaps appropriately, these suggested solutions are never presented as a final answer. Nevertheless what may from one perspective seem a fatal flaw, a failure to produce a coherent system of ethics, from another can be perceived as a vindication of the anarchist principle. If social practices never become institutionalised then they are always debatable, provisional and can be re-negotiated. The ideal anarchist community is a dynamic one, where groups and individuals can extend the realm of freedom to include the determination of needs and desires within consensual social relations.

Such utopian thinking though should give no comfort to the promulgators of the emancipatory possibilities of the 'learning community', for it is questionable whether these solutions are possible when the community has been constructed according to the institutional rules of the academy or corporation which are usually beyond the influence of the participants in the community. After all the anarchist ideal is of voluntaristic communities where members can freely join and leave and where the community is only expected to last as long as it meets the self-defined needs of its members. The restraints of the McUniversity do not allow such learning communities to exist, whether virtual or otherwise, because of the apparatus of assessment, quality assurance, course specification and so on. In addition, the teacher is the embodiment and point of distribution of a highly unequal power relationship between the academy and the learner, and this relationship is unchanged by the mediation of ICT or re-badging the teacher as facilitator.

In addition, the institutionalised setting of most learning suggests the sort of identity that is appropriate to learners and teachers.

Within management education these identities are strongly linked to the gendered and commodified representations of management itself. The way in which identity is moulded by such groups is the focus of our discussion of feminist theory elsewhere in this paper. From an anarchist viewpoint, talk of learning communities may rightly be regarded with suspicion as a rhetorical smoke-screen or ideological device that conceals its less savoury aspects under its rhetorical 'warm glow' (Parker 1998, see Rigg and Trehan (1999), for example. Some, believing communitarian rhetoric as hopelessly compromised have even called for its complete abandonment. (Reynolds 2000). The allure of the virtual community might be even more prone to the obscuring of the difficulties presented by representation and hidden forms of power. However, what might be called for, rather than abandonment, is a more carefully worked out ethics of community based on the cautionary insights provided by the debates within feminism and anarchism. In our conclusions we seek to suggest some of the ethical questions which arise for us and use them to evaluate whether the 'ideal' learning community is possible at all within institutional settings, whether virtual or otherwise.

Conclusion

So where have our two strands of critique taken us in this paper? They begin from two rather different positions but share similar concerns with what happens when individuals come together to seek common - or at least complementary - aims. We think that bringing these two traditions together poses some fascinating theoretical possibilities for critical pedagogy. In this paper we've suggested that post-structuralism demonstrates a fundamentally anarchist sensibility and may provide an alternative theoretical basis for the development of anarchism beyond its Enlightenment roots. Anarchism also provides a set of political and organisational principles that are compatible with the post-structuralist suspicion of ideologies and collective movements. (Call, 1999; May, 1994). However, our purpose in this paper was more limited than creating some form of post-structuralist anarchism this - we sought only to raise a number of problems with the implicit assumptions regarding the learning community in both 'actual' and 'virtual' forms. As a (hopefully) fruitful stimulus to discussion, we conclude our analysis, not by a complete rejection of the entire idea of learning communities but rather with some ethical questions that could be used to interrogate actual instances of learning communities in respect of identity and ideas of consent.

Our first question is: to what extent is it possible within institutional settings to achieve a freely negotiated learning process? From the anarchist viewpoint, the distorting effects of power and hierarchy will inevitably compromise institutions not entirely under the collective control of those they purport to exist for. From the post-structuralist viewpoint the processes that shape identity, which are largely beyond the control of individuals, are not escapable within a learning community rather such communities merely provide specific discourses and sites of subjectivity.

Secondly we ask is a freely negotiated community ever possible when there are 'teachers' involved? Once again anarchism would suggest not because the authority over what counts as 'legitimate' learning is embodied in the person of the teacher. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, has considerable difficulties with the idea of a freely negotiated community given the way that it sees subjectivity as shifting and as a product of the interplay of discipline and desires, not as something that can negotiate with that idea of authority on its own terms.

Perhaps the closest to the ideal model for anarchists would be something along the lines suggested by Illich (1977), where people choose each other freely to advance collective projects but where no judgements are made about what has been learnt beyond the judgements of the learners. In other words where there is no mediation by institutions or external validation of what counts as learning. This utopian position only looks possible in a very different sort of society from the one we actually inhabit, and raises its own questions for linkages between micro and macro political projects. However, are there ways in which critically-engaged educators can carve out some sort of space for something approaching such an ideal and if it were ever achieved would it be able to overcome the allure of the romanticised learner that is problematised by our post-structuralist analysis?

Perhaps the best way to answer such difficult questions is by asking yet more in relation to our own practice as teachers and the groups we are involved with in teaching, both off and on-line. We need to ask if we are aware of the micro-political processes by which identity is being worked out both in relation to teachers and students. We also need to identify the 'ideals' that our students and we pursue, where they originate from and how they operate in terms of the interplay between desires and the networks of power in the classroom. We should also explore the range of subject positions available within our learning communities and think about whether they are exploratory, extending and playful or limiting and oppressive. We could also usefully inquire into the way in which we make use of the experiences and identities of other members to achieve our own desires - are we sure these are mutually enriching or does it take place at the expense of some members? And finally, what are the limits to the extent to which individual desires can and should be accommodated within the community? If there are constraints are these justified by what each member gains?

We would not pretend that these questions can be answered in a final or straightforward way but rather that raising them and the keeping them in mind can help prevent our uncritical assumption that communities are inevitably a good thing.

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