



Seeking Realness in a Virtual World: Dis/illusion and Community in Online Education

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What is community? Is "online community" an oxymoron? Like many social practices, community requires boundary maintenance, upkeep and redefinition in these times of globalization and innovation. Technological advancement, at the same time a force and product of globalization, is both a threat to traditional forms of community and an opportunity to broaden community or create it anew. Trying to understand the concept and experience of today's community, we might be tempted to essentialize it. As Anderson (1999, p. 457) says, "The nature of communities and the ground conditions under which they operate are changing profoundly – but the word is often used in the most ambiguous ways, as if a community of the 21st century could [be] the same thing as a community, say, of the 12th." Changes aside, does an essence of community remain consistent and defining? How does the encroachment of "virtuality" or the almost real into "reality" help or force us to redefine community?

I began this research with a straightforward research problem: The word "community" is increasingly applied to virtual environments, including online educational programs. At the same time, those environments challenge the traditional meaning of community. For this study, I used a community in which I had participated, an online graduate program called the Inter-continental Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change (ALGC). Launched in September 2001 (2002 at The University of British Columbia, or UBC), it is a collaboration of four post-secondary institutions (UBC in Canada, where I was enrolled, Linköping University in Sweden, the University of Technology Sydney in Australia, and the University of the Western Cape in South Africa). Conducted primarily online and in English, this

innovative cohort-based program brings together students and faculty from four institutions. I enrolled in the ALGC program in 2002 and remained in for one year, after which I transferred into a conventional face-to-face (f2f) Masters program. During my time as an ALGC student, I was surprised at the speed and enthusiasm with which some of the other students began to describe our learning environment as a community. Caught up in course requirements, we never dissected what "community" meant in this, or in any other, context.

Ultimately, part of the reason that I left the ALGC program had to do with my feelings about community, and limitations to community that I saw in an online setting. Without social cues – nods of heads, smiles, frowns, glazed-over eyes – I felt at a loss to know when I was understood or when I really understood others. The asynchronous communication of the ALGC's bulletin board was convenient, especially given that participants were spread across time zones, but it was also confusing. What, for example, constitutes simple conversation in an asynchronous online environment? Is it the time sequence in which postings are made – so that the conversation lurches from topic to topic – or is it the postings' topical sequence – making presence throughout the conversation irrelevant? With technology so obviously and heavily mediating communication and relationships, how could we really identify which qualities and ideas were vested in the individuals? After I left the ALGC program, I continued to puzzle over these questions and, when the opportunity arose a year later, I undertook this study.

I began with straightforward research questions. How do students in an online program understand, develop and distinguish virtual

community? What value does community have for them? How are technologies in general and the particular technology used in this program seen to influence the development of community? What questions or concerns around rights, power and interests arise in that community? As the research progressed, I discovered that, with everything found, there was still something missing. Ultimately, the paradox in the aim of this inquiry – to find realness in the virtual – left me with questions for every answer.

Deterritorializing/Reterritorializing "Online Adult Learning Communities"

Critical and postmodern perspectives invite us to strip away traditional boundaries of the territory under investigation, to avoid arbitrary limitations and broaden the inquiry. Figure 1 presents some of the discourses of technology and community, and especially related to online learning communities. This visual re/presentation of the intersection of technology, community and learning suggests how all three concepts are increasingly disrupted.

Community has been a topic of interest

to philosophers, political leaders and social activists for centuries. It can be seen as both a "value in itself," inasmuch as it builds relationships, which meet human needs, and democracy, stability or social justice (Frazer, 2000, p. 187). It can also be defined as "both...a particular class of social entities, and...a particular range of social relations" which distributes both burdens and opportunities. These "social entities" include families, religious institutions, schools, neighborhoods, and social or professional associations. By a "range of social relations," Frazer refers to "mutuality and solidarity" as well as sharing (p. 186). Community can also hold "instrumental value," inasmuch as it allows for the development of democracy, stability or social justice (Frazer, p. 185). Community, then, is both a "something" – a defined, bounded setting – and a "somehow" – a way of being together in that setting. Traditionally, community has often been seen in relation to space or "propinquity." Entire fields of research and practice, within disciplines such as geography, planning, nursing, psychology and social work, have developed around such notions of community.

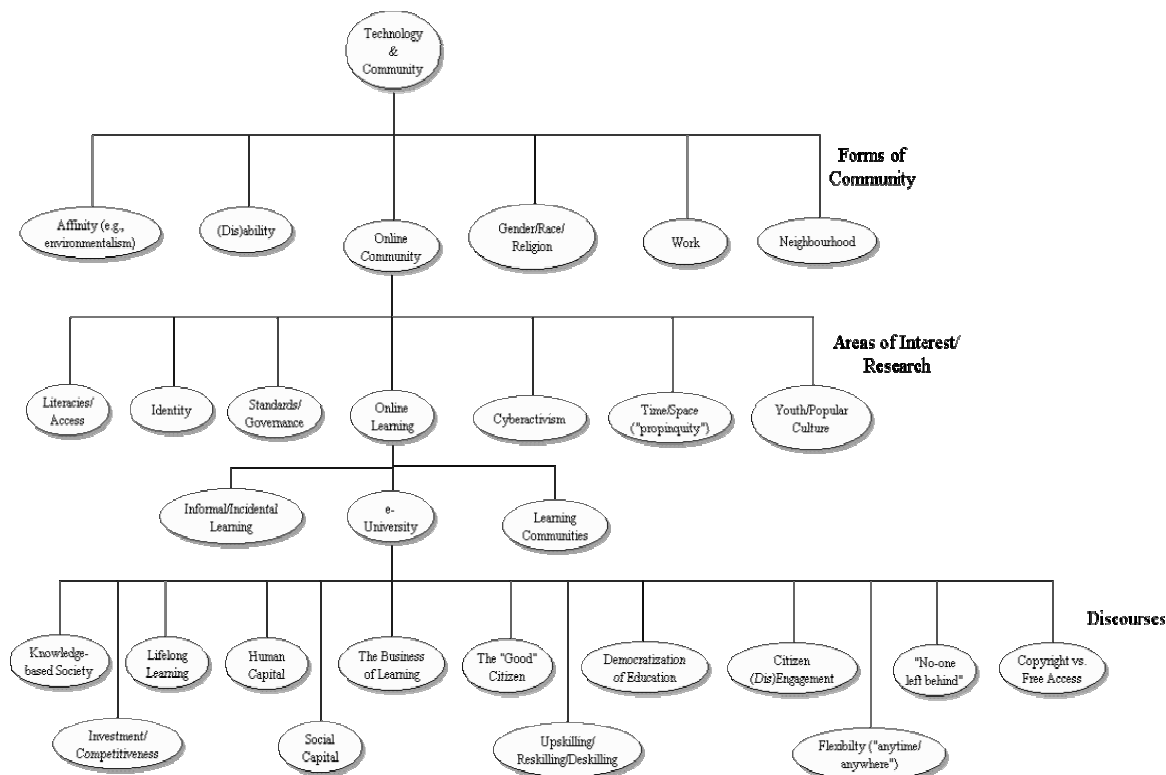


Figure 1: Mapping the Territory of the Online Learning Community

Beyond geographical or "territorial" communities, some writers have also described "relational" communities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 8), which develop around alliances, associations or affinities. Professions, religions and activism are examples of affiliations around which relational communities form. McMillan and Chavis (p. 9) outline four elements of either type of community: "membership" or belonging, "influence" of the individual on the community and the community on the individual, "integration and fulfillment of needs" of the individual by the community, and "shared emotional connection."

Discourses and understandings from Plato onwards have often idealized community as the hallmark of civil society; however, as some authors remind us, communities can have both positive and negative effects (Lee, 1993; Nicholson, 1991; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Historically, a community's normative constitution has been used to exclude individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and other characteristics. In the context of her research into an organization of racialized women, Lee (1993) problematizes the ideal of a uniform community of homogeneous members, rather than "the possibility of constantly shifting identity positions or of external social relations that might structure the presentation of certain identity positions while subordinating others" (p. 28). Likewise, Nicholson (1991) is concerned about identities and subjectivities, or the tension between the individual and the community, and challenges post-secondary educators to redefine community to accommodate individual diversity. Still, she recognizes the importance of community and concludes that "We cannot allow concentration on differences to overwhelm awareness of our common humanity and our need to live according to shared norms of civility and respect" (Nicholson, p. 53).

Some contemporary theorists argue that globalization breaks down traditional community boundaries, meanings and possibilities, offering new ways and purposes of relating. Wellman (1999) proposes a shift in the conceptualization and study of community, away from the traditional emphasis on place and towards a new emphasis on relationships. This "social network" approach to community can accommodate both a "whole network" approach,

which describes "the comprehensive structure of role relationships in a complete population...[and provides] simultaneous views of the social system as a whole and of the parts that make up the system" (Wellman, p. 18), and a "personal network" approach, which provides "Ptolemaic views of networks as they may be viewed by the individuals at their centers: the world as we each see revolving around us" (Wellman, p. 19). For Wellman, the advantage of this way of studying community is that it maintains a focus on the elements of community – individual, supportive relationships – rather than on specific, traditional understandings of community.

In his own work, Wellman tends to favor the personal network approach. A whole network approach is useful in bounded communities, such as neighborhoods, but the personal network approach is preferred precisely because it does not assume or require boundaries. Rather, it involves mapping relationships, creating a web at the center of which sits the individual¹. Wellman and his colleagues conclude that contemporary community ties continue to be sociable and supportive, but are now also narrow, specialized, transitory, geographically dispersed, and what Wellman (1999) characterizes as private and "domesticated."

Although Wellman's conceptualization of the personal network might be useful, there are drawbacks to it. First, his mapping stresses the quality of strength of ties over other relational qualities, and obscures the question of power relations. Secondly, this reframing turns community into something that people *have*, rather than something that people *constitute*, and challenges McMillan and Chavis' (1986) element of belonging. Thirdly, people continue to live within a localized reality. Wellman

¹ In many ways, Wellman's thoughts seem like a contemporary reiteration of Ferdinand Tönnies' explanation of the differences between "*gemeinschaft*," or community, and "*gesellschaft*," or society. Writing about capitalism, and the urbanization and industrialization trends of the nineteenth century, Tönnies distinguished "community," with its intimate bonds, solidarity and stability, from the ascendant "society," characterized by "competitive, heterogeneous, impersonal, secular, superficial, transitory, and fragmented" relationships (Hugo, 2000, p. 7).

(1999) himself admits that "even spatially liberated people cannot avoid neighbors" (p. 27). To the extent that neoliberalism and globalization play out in local communities and in personal networks, we short-change studies of community and globalization by pretending that locality is no longer crucial. Fourthly, Wellman's approach gives rise to a seemingly insurmountable paradox, as the traditional bounded, stable, shared community is now seen as unbounded, unstable and, most ironically, individualized. Community is not-community.

Virtual, Online or Cybercommunities

Virtual or cybercommunities heighten Wellman's conceptual challenge to traditional notions of community. In the eyes of technological enthusiasts or "utopians" (Walmsley, 2000, p. 8), the unbordering of virtual community furthers democratization by extending community access to increasing numbers and types of people. This is the electronic, "global village" that Marshall McLuhan championed. On the other hand, "dystopians" worry that technologies "are not neutral, but rather benefit different groups in society differentially, leading eventually to the demise of 'the civic' and the rise of 'the private'" (Walmsley, p. 8). From this latter perspective, the role of technology in mediating relationships within a virtual community raises concerns about trust, authenticity and inclusion.

Referring to Wellman's work, Bakardjieva (2004) agrees that a "false dichotomy between virtual and real-life communities" (p. 123) has been constructed. Wellman and Gulia (1999) conclude that virtual communities are both like and unlike face-to-face (f2f) communities (especially the personal networks which interest Wellman). Both are "intermittent, specialized, and varying in strength.... But in virtual communities, the market metaphor of shopping around for support in specialized ties is even more exaggerated than in 'real life' because the architecture of computer networks promotes market-like situations" (Wellman & Gulia, p. 353). Online environments present apparently unlimited choice of virtual communities. Wellman and Gulia argue that virtuality expands heterogeneity, by drawing on global diversity. Whether or not virtual community members exercise their ability to exit a community when

differences and tensions surface, I question, with Walmsley (2000), how this possibility and awareness of difference and conflict influence trust, commitment, respect, longevity and diversity in virtual communities. As Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) note, "Critics of online community are thus right to dampen naïve enthusiasm for the Internet. They are right to criticize the rhetoric of the Information Highway, including its easy praise of online togetherness and oblivion to the commercialization of the Internet" (p. 24).

Walmsley (2000) cautions against either utopian or dystopian views on this matter. He reiterates some of Wellman's assertions – that virtual communities are transitory and unstable, for example – but raises additional points and reaches different conclusions. He reminds us that technology eliminates neither locale nor local markets and experiences, that its usefulness is contextualized by the local conditions of its users, that it remains commercially driven and inequitably accessible, and that it raises new concerns around surveillance and privacy. Walmsley also points out that, ironically, technology is often used to support, not to replace, "real" communities (to arrange meetings, for example). Love it or hate it, embrace it or shun it, Walmsley argues, the rise of virtual community does not necessarily mean the end of f2f community.

The Role of Community in Adult Learning

If the concept of community is complicated, the insertion of "learning" further complicates the conversation. As Hugo (2002, p. 9) explains,

It is difficult to find a usable past for learning communities for two reasons. First, the historical evidence of learning in community is disparate and possibly quite ephemeral. Communities of learners may not be oriented to written documentation, may not have education as a primary goal, or may operate in a virtual medium like today's internet.... Second, to understand the relationship between learning and community we need to gather evidence not only of the existence of learning communities and the techniques used to support their work but also of their social contexts.

Bitterman (2000) outlines the roots of learning communities in behavioral, cognitive and social learning psychology, and the influences of the early constructivists. Scholars such as Peter Jarvis have taken up John Dewey's notion of "disjuncture" between what individuals know and what they encounter in social settings as a basis for learning, and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) understandings of community's pivotal role in the creation of meaning, the influence of available "tools" on human development and the importance of outside help in facilitating learning. For sociocultural learning theorists, learning is community-based, locally situated and interactive. In the context of community-at-large, Hugo (2002) discusses various purposes of adult education: the betterment of the individual, community improvement or regeneration through citizenship education, and social transformation through community action.

One of the best-known models of sociocultural learning is Lave and Wenger's "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger defines communities of practice as "mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning. From this perspective, *communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning*" (p. 86, emphasis in original). The basic premises are that cognition is social, knowledge is developed through participation, and meaning is produced through learning. In his later writings, Wenger describes communities of practice as "organic, spontaneous, and informal [as well as] resistant to supervision and interference" (Wenger & Snyder, p. 140); however, these additions seem more confusing than helpful. Whether or not they form spontaneously, communities develop spontaneous cliques and strategies and can, I think, incorporate communities of practice.

Cohort-based programs² work to develop a community of practice by building stable, collaborative relationships over the course of the program. Lawrence (2002) recommends, first, the incorporation of an initial

² Students in a "cohort-based program" go through most of the program together. Instructors move into and out of the cohort, but students work together over a series of courses, in theory getting to know one another and forming stronger bonds. The ALGC program is a cohort-based program.

retreat which focuses students' attention at the outset of the program and enables them to get to know one another and create bonds, and, second, the provision of ongoing social opportunities to allow for spontaneous exchanges and deeper bonds. In Lawrence's mind, a cohort is both a "minisociety" (p. 86) in which individuals take on a range of necessary roles and "like a family" which can be "functional" or "dysfunctional" (p. 87). While she acknowledges that tension and conflict will arise in a cohort because of "misunderstanding, power imbalance, or a lack of tolerance of perspectives stemming from differing worldviews" (p. 87), she gives us little sense of where and how power imbalances arise. In common parlance, family is frequently called upon as an analogy for teams or communities; however, it entirely overlooks the social, class and racial differences that might disrupt a learning community.

Bitterman (2000) brings issues of power relations in all communities to the surface in her discussion. She asserts the importance of continual questioning, challenging and critique by members of the learning community of the group's purpose, goals and strategies. The job of educators in the learning community shifts from sharing knowledge to one in which they

help learners develop communicative competence and the ability to reflect critically on the differences that emerge when people with divergent views come together [and] help individuals develop self-awareness and self-knowledge that enables autonomy and also leads people to contribute more richly to the community's knowledge base and communication process. (Bitterman, p. 33)

Learning Online

In some key ways, online adult education communities are similar to other types of communities. In their study of an online program for library staff, Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2001) found that participants defined their community in terms of purpose rather than technology: Theirs was first and foremost an educational community which happened to be constituted in an online environment rather than a conventional classroom. Furthermore, as the students approached the end of their program, fulfilling

their program requirements, the importance of community diminished and they retreated from that community (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, 2000).

In other ways, online adult education communities present distinct qualities, opportunities and drawbacks. An online community functions only as well as the technology which supports it, and technological failures surface as deterrents and obstacles (Gabriel, 2004). When technologies work, presence and participation assume new meanings and importance. As Conrad (2002a, ¶40) explains, "The option of choice is not present in online learning... Online learners must stand up and be counted. They must commit and be present... [T]here is no anonymity in online learning." Nonverbal social cues, which convey so much information in f2f communities, are absent in online communities. Community members can try to replace these cues with expressions and conventions developed for online communication (Wang, Sierra & Folger, 2003); however, in my own experience I have found that "emoticons" flatten emotional responses and responsiveness. There is also the issue of understanding and "hearing" silence in the online environment (Conrad, 2002a & 2002b; Lawrence, 2002; Haythornthwaite et al., 2000). Lawrence tells us that "In the absence of nonverbal cues, it is difficult to know what silence means... Participants need to work harder to keep the community functional" (p. 89). This can mean the betrayal of one's silence for the sake of another expression.

When students share thoughts, they can become very reflective and deliberate, especially in programs using asynchronous communication. Some students see this as an advantage, but for others it introduces new problems. Gabriel (2004) found that participants in her study of an online Masters of Education course appreciated that the online archive of their comments became a helpful way "to track their own growth as learners and to see how their thinking had progressed over time" (p. 64). They could take time to think through their responses before they "spoke" them through postings. On the other hand, in her study of students in a cohort-based, online distance undergraduate program in adult education, Conrad (2002a & 2002b) found indications of self-censorship, as students became aware that their comments would be

available throughout the course and perhaps beyond it. In Conrad's (2002b, p. 208) interpretation, "The fact that their words were going into what they perceived to be a public and permanent place gave pause to many."

Related to students' self-censorship is their awareness of surveillance in the online community. Conrad refers to the online educational setting as a "fishbowl" and a "model of distance delivery...[in which] there was no distance: you cannot run and you cannot hide" (Conrad, 2002a, p. 58). Some researchers (Wang et al., 2003; Conrad, 2002b) have also found that, especially when conflict arises in a learning community, students become sensitive to netiquette, as they attempt to alleviate the tension by being polite, inclusive and responsive in their communication.

Part of the promotional advantage that online education has over f2f programs is its alleged convenience and flexibility. "Anytime/anywhere" education is considered to be accessible to students regardless of where they live or work, and regardless of their time constraints. In previous research, participants have acknowledged that such convenience is important to them (Hiltz, 1998). On the other hand, this is balanced by a growing frustration as participants moved through their academic programs and realized how time consuming it is to read and construct postings. Some students reported adapting to this reality by reading selectively, identifying students whose postings they are most likely to find interesting and useful (Gabriel, 2004).

Several tactics have been employed to support learning communities in online educational programs. A common step is to offer a separate online social "space." Findings about the usefulness of this are mixed; some researchers recommend this (Lawrence, 2002) while others observe that students consider the "social space" as just one more place to generate and read postings (Conrad, 2002a & 2002b). There is greater agreement about the value of various forms of contact, especially to supplement asynchronous communication which is the least immediate and spontaneous, and least conducive to community building. Face-to-face contact, sometimes in the form of an initial retreat, is built into many online adult education programs (Gabriel, 2004; Conrad, 2002a & 2002b; Lawrence, 2002; Haythornthwaite et al.,

2000). Collaborative, group assignments have also been positively received by students (Wang et al., 2003; Hiltz, 1998).

McIsaac (2002) raises two last issues of importance to online learning communities: the invisibility of international and community divisions, and the role of Western capitalism in promoting the use of online learning. Although she remains enthusiastic about the "co-operative learning strategies possible through online collaboration" (p. 18), she qualifies her support of online learning: "The promise of online education is that it can offer affordable, culturally appropriate learning materials in educational settings. How can affordable materials be offered to developing countries where the equipment, training and technology infrastructure seem to be overwhelming obstacles to equal information access?" (p. 19).

Methodology

This study involved an action research methodology. Given both the topic of this inquiry and the reality that potential participants lived in different parts of the world, I chose to conduct the study online using Blackboard, which was used in the ALGC program. I developed a bulletin board with a series of discussion "forums," each with a few open-ended questions designed facilitate conversation. Discussion topics included experiences of community, community in adult education, technology in an online community, community in the ALGC program, and the intersection of technology, community and the public interest. Using the Blackboard bulletin board, I used a focus group-style technique as a way of discussing issues of online community as an online community. From the beginning of the study, it was clear that I would be active as a participant-researcher. I also invited participants to raise questions, concerns or suggestions that they had over the course of the study.

Participants were recruited from among the students who, like me, had participated in the ALGC cohort beginning in August 2002. Invitations to participate, along with a description of the study and a letter of consent were sent to the students who were in the cohort when I left it in August 2003. Four of these twenty-four students agreed to participate in the study; my participation meant that five of us would be involved in the online focus group. All

of the participants were "mature students" – students returning to university after a period of employment or child rearing. At the beginning of our studies, we were all engaged in full-time employment. I was the only participant who stopped working full-time during the program. At the time of this study I was engaged in a doctoral program and the other participants were employed. Including me, there were four women and one man in the study. Two participants were from Canada, two were from Sweden and one participant was from Australia.

The ALGC program is a professional Masters of Education program exploring the ties between adult learning and global change. Students from the collaborating institutions move through the program together, except for the few elective courses. Institutional differences impart local nuances: Students at UBC receive percentage grades while others are graded on a pass/fail or letter basis, and some students must undertake a final thesis or research project. Various assignments are submitted online and all courses feature at least one group assignment. Most instructors divide the cohort into smaller discussion groups. The objectives for the first course, *Locating Oneself in Global Learning*, include providing "a framework for continuity and a place to experience the incredible potential of living and learning in a global community that this program offers" ("*An intercontinental online Master of Education*," 2004, p. 3). Within the ALGC discourse, community is seen as globalized, and the program is an example of the new possibility for community.

Using Wellman's (1999) community network approach, we can map the relationships present in the bounded ALGC community and capture some of the key power relations (Figure 2). In this figure, the ALGC students/study participants are connected to a series of institutional, organizational, geographical and socio-political structures or relations. Through them, the students become linked to other individuals. Some of these links are central to or acknowledged within the ALGC program (e.g., through courses, students connect to instructors and student peers). Other structures and individuals are important to students, but might never be made visible, and exist just beneath the surface of the ALGC community. Relations of power are also indicated in this figure: instructors are located "above" the ALGC

students, while student peers are located at the same level. This figure represents the ALGC community while the students were enrolled in the program; this figure: instructors are located

now that they have completed it, relationships and hierarchies shift. How the community will likewise shift, and whether or not it will survive remains to be seen.

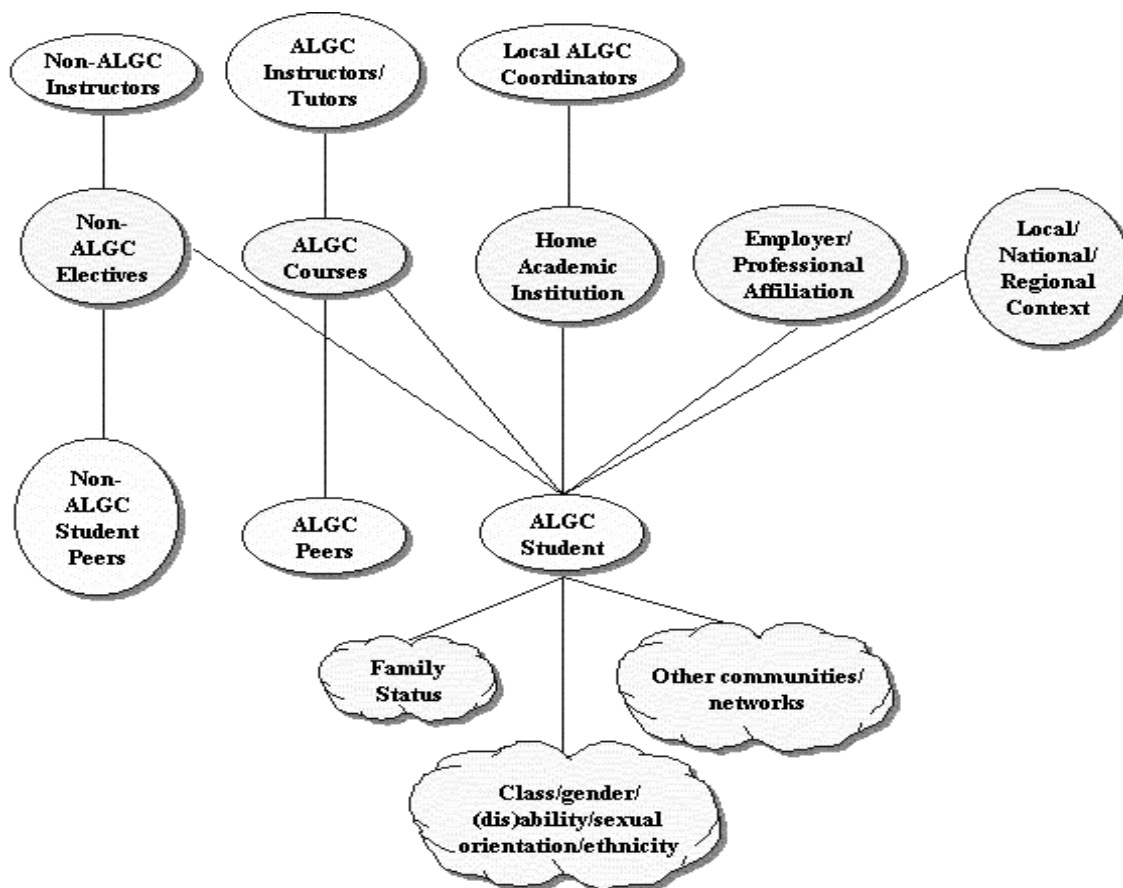


Figure 2: The ALGC Student's Network of Relationships

Where Are We Now?

Venturing into a Postmodernist Sensibility

As I noted above, this inquiry has no clear resolution. Participants, myself included, often held diverse opinions about the links among technology, community and education. In my analysis, I wanted to maintain a sense of difference among and the contradictions within our comments. Given the reality of my own multiple voices in this research – as author, participant and reflective researcher – I also wanted to include differences within myself. Much of this article retains the conventions of academic writing. Postmodern influences become evident in this analysis, where I will break with conventions in the following ways:

When I write as "author," I will write like this. When I write as "participant," I will write like *this* (as I will when I quote other participants). When I write as "reflective researcher," I will write like *this*, and will offset text for the sake of clarity. In this way, I will present a reflective, puzzled analysis of three themes emerging in this study.

The Elements of Community

I think that it doesn't really matter whether we are real or virtual – the qualities of listening, encouragement, recognition (as Alison said) and, I suppose, respect are all qualities which must be present (in my opinion) for a

community to flourish. The other thing is that all of these have to be genuine. Paying lip service to them doesn't work. It may be that it is easier when you are face to face with someone to detect that they are or are not being genuine than it is on an on-line environment. This may be a barrier to the rapid development of on-line communities – or what makes it easier (apparently in the ALGC course) for older and more experienced – maybe less anxious – individuals to trust themselves to it.

– Kate³

The ALGC community is bounded by enrollment. This solidifies it, but presents a problem if members depart: The community can never replenish itself, and members who depart can never return. What is my relationship to the other participants? Does this help explain the decision of other ALGC students not to participate in my study?

Consistent with the literature, participants discussed various reasons to form community and different ways for accomplishing this. As Kate's statement makes clear, participants had a common conceptualization of the elements of both online and f2f communities. She also indicated that politics offered a similarity between online and f2f communities: "*Just like geographical communities there can be factions with different agendas, conflict and peacemakers. I guess the...trick is to try and learn from the interactions which occur.*"

The workplace was quickly raised as a form of community, and participants also discussed family, town, neighborhood and the ALGC cohort. Participants generally defined community by relationships rather than physicality. In discussing the elements of community, participants mentioned "*emotional support, encouragement, a listening ear*" (McMillan and Chavis' (1986) "integration and fulfillment of needs"), "*recognition*" of contributions and "*give and take*" (McMillan and

Chavis' "influence"). In one of her postings, Katrina added that "*it takes time to build the confidence and trust one needs to achieve authentic communication and participation,*" and others mentioned qualities such as trust, and shared interests and values (McMillan and Chavis' "shared emotional connection"). Shared purpose was considered less important overall, although participants agreed that this is necessary for community formation. Reflecting on her involvement in a community developed in her undergraduate program, Alison explained,

The starting point to come together was the purpose... and that purpose is still included in one of our shared interests – education – that has developed in different directions. We do not have an exact scheme to follow..., but when too [much] time has passed one of us sends out an invitation, at least once a year, often more frequently.... I compare communities to all kinds of relationships. To make them last, people involved have to willingly give and take. I also think that people need to take initiative themselves, try actions out and not be waiting for others to act – even if it is not "my turn." But it is also about being sensitive, using the "antennae." There is not [one single] "recipe" describing how to make it work.

She also mentioned a series of other qualities, which, in her mind, are important: "*being trustworthy, honest, reliable, forgiving, broad-minded and understanding.*" Finally, there was general agreement that leadership and stability are also necessary for a community to thrive.

Alison went on to raise an issue which McMillan and Chavis (1986) also see as central to community: belonging. She related her experience of a lecture where most of the audience members knew one another. During the breaks, she became acutely aware of her "outsider" status in that community encounter. Although community is often romanticized and idealized, it is important to remember that communities are both inclusive and exclusive, sometimes for less than honorable reasons.

³ Consistent with common ethics protocol, I use pseudonyms for all participants, except me.

In general, we seemed to be discussing community in a rather traditional sense – even if it did include virtual community – rather than Wellman’s (1999) sense of personal networks. I was struck by the degree to which we conjured images of stable, consistent communities that bring people together, and the sentiment of belonging. These seem so different from Wellman’s utilitarian, individualistic focus. Wellman might be right in his assessment of what community realistically looks like and how it functions today, but he does not capture what the participants relish about community.

Connections/Disconnections

I think once one has got accustomed to this kind of communication it will always be a part of one’s life. The barriers towards on-line discussions have been removed. So, in that sense there is no going back to normal life, though the curiosity to meet face-to-face after an experience such as this has increased. It would be exciting to meet some of the tutors.

– Katrina

Numerous authors have commented on the absence of social cues in online communities, including the particular issue of the invisible quiet listener (Wang et al., 2003; Conrad, 2002a & 2002b; Lawrence, 2002; Haythornthwaite et al., 2000). Participants in this study reflected on the implications of technologically mediated learning, particularly asynchronous communication as it relates to the ALGC program. Bill outlined what he saw as the benefits of such communication:

I think asynchronous communication took our discussions to a higher level. In an asynchronous discussion we are able to reflect, research, review, and revise... all before we "say" a single word. We can even compose a contribution, and NOT post it, having realized in the process, "No, I'm wrong," or "That is not relevant."

Kate agreed that online ALGC conversations had greater depth than many conversations in f2f

educational settings, and especially appreciated the fact "*it gave me time to myself, to think about things I was interested in. I spend my whole life being busy looking after other people’s needs both at work and at home.... It was great to have some grown up thinking and discussion!*" Recognizing the international scope of the ALGC program, Alison mentioned how valuable asynchronous conversation is for students for whom English is not a first language or a language spoken daily.

While Blackboard offers these advantages, there was an admission that something is lost in asynchronous communication. Katrina noted that it gives students "*time for reflection,*" but also creates the risk of "*more ‘clinical’ and chilled*" language and eliminates the quality of spontaneity. So, participants in this study thought in terms of "and/but," rather than "either/or" when they discussed advantages and disadvantages to the predominantly asynchronous communication in the ALGC community.

Many of the community-building tactics outlined in the literature were also used in the ALGC program. Participants who were able to meet in person appreciated such meetings. Collaborative group assignments and smaller discussion forums on Blackboard were helpful in realizing this objective. As positive as his earlier comment about asynchronous communication was, in a later comment Bill reiterated the value of f2f meetings:

I feel that these meetings were of great value. They permitted a kind of communication that was lacking in the asynchronous environment of Blackboard, and that allowed us to achieve a deeper understanding of who our colleagues were. Undoubtedly this contributed to the formation of a learning community. Interestingly, discussions in these meetings rarely centered on topics discussed on-line, but rather they were more focussed on the on-line learning experience itself, such as its challenges and advantages.

Now that the 2002 ALGC cohort has completed its studies, I wondered about whether its community would be maintained and, if so, how. Participants described some of the activities that were undertaken to maintain the

community. The program developed an alumni website, where graduates continue their conversations. Several months prior to this study, some of the students organized a trip to South Africa, where they met their student peers and South African instructors. Bill discussed these and other possible measures:

Our community may be sustained by our inclination, as educators, to life-long learning and professional development. On the other hand, we are busy professionals with myriad other responsibilities and interests. I think that the face-to-face meetings...have been instrumental in maintaining my interest in the ALGC community. Given the success of our visit to SA, there is some talk of having a reunion – and even an "Institute" – in Vancouver, next year. The Alumni web site is off to a slow start, but possibly it will eventually evolve into a useful resource. It depends entirely on our collective will.

Alison, too, mentioned the alumni website, and was enthusiastic about its potential to maintain the community that she valued and enjoyed.

The success of the ALGC community for the other participants in this study is an achievement, given previous studies that find asynchronous communication to be the least likely to facilitate community development. It certainly worked for them in a way that it did not for me. Perhaps this points to a limitation of the communities of practice model (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which assumes that community members learn together, uniformly. I remain troubled by the paradoxes of online learning communities. I did most of my ALGC work from a physically intimate corner – the workstation in my kitchen – but had not felt so little identity, engagement or presence in an educational community since the large lecture classes of my undergraduate studies. I routinely wondered if I understood my ALGC instructors and classmates, often feeling misunderstood by them – and at a loss about how to deal with that. The text-based relationships of the ALGC community seemed so uni-dimensional, so full of unchecked assumptions. I still do not know how to portray conversations that are common occurrences in

f2f communities, and how to facilitate and indicate connections. For Conrad (2002a & 2002b), "there is no anonymity" in online classrooms; in some way, is that not all there is?

Technology and Education: Democratization or Elitism?

The on-line community spread around the world with ALGC as a common denominator has provided me with experiences and knowledge that I think I have not really understood yet. During the last two years I do think I have widened my views in many areas.

– Alison

In utopian discourse, technology has the capacity to democratize education. In this discourse, technology is a means to include people in educational communities regardless of geographic location or time constraints. The appeal lies in the combination of its optimism and apparent logic; however, as Walmsley (2000) reminds us, technological development and application are far from neutral. Access to both technology and education continues to be mitigated by complex relationships between class, gender, literacy (both linguistic and technological), race and other characteristics⁴.

I was interested in exploring this issue with other participants, and dedicated a discussion forum to it. Katrina was the first participant to wade into this debate, responding with this posting:

Obviously the possibility to reach 'the masses' increases with advanced technology. It seems however that a certain degree of education is required to make full use of "the new information society." Lifelong learning, when only offered virtually, risks excluding groups that don't have the basic qualifications to read and write or the economic resources to buy or access computers and web-based networks for learning.

⁴ For a review of the link between gender and technology, see S. Turkle, S. & S. Papert. (1990). Epistemological pluralism: Styles and voices within the computer culture. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(1), 128-157.

Thus the previously privileged get more and the underprivileged less and the development of an A team and B team becomes even more evident.

Bill echoed many of those sentiments in his posting:

Public support will always be needed for the democratization of learning.... Unfortunately, current neo-liberal policies are taking us in the opposite direction, towards a user-pay system. However..., the internet has the potential to enhance the democratization of learning. Eventually, internet access will be readily available even to the poor, just as television is today, and it is unlikely that politicians and educational administrators will be able to resist the economies of scale offered by the mass distribution of education via the internet. Whether or not education serves the needs of the powers-that-be (corporations, governments) or the needs of the people being educated will determine the nature and extent of democratization that occurs.

Covert politics of online educational communities was one topic that went largely unexplored. One participant in response to my comment expressed some curiosity about the "surveillance function" of Blackboard, where instructors could monitor students, but this did not generate interest. A related issue is "how issues (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) which are present in more traditional communities present themselves in online communities." In response to this probe, Kate offered her opinion: "I would like to think that on-line...discussion reduced the gaps and helped communities focus on similarities and **the more important issues of life** rather than looking at differences between groups which may be physically obvious" (emphasis mine). While Alison recognized differences among ALGC students, she did "not consider technology related to class or gender, at least not concerning on-line master's programs. When you have come that far on the 'educational ladder' you are probably interested in and curious about finding information quickly and you also know...how to do it."

Is the focus on participants' similarities related to Conrad's (2002b) findings about the importance of getting along in the online learning community? What did Kate mean when she said that focusing on similarities was a way of focusing on "the more important issues of life?"

We had a "coffee shop" forum on Blackboard throughout the ALGC program – a "place" where we could go to socialize. Going to an online coffee shop is an example of how important differences are masked, rather than eliminated, in online communities. Unless we go to the coffee shop together, how do we know whose car has a bumper sticker indicating religious affiliation and whose features a gay pride flag? How do we know who takes the bus?

We had a "coffee shop" forum on Blackboard throughout the ALGC program – a "place" where we could go to socialize. Going to an online coffee shop is an example of how important differences are masked, rather than eliminated, in online communities. Unless we go to the coffee shop together, how do we know whose car has a bumper sticker indicating religious affiliation and whose features a gay pride flag? How do we know who takes the bus? When we get to the coffee shop, who orders a double shot latte, and who settles for a single shot Americano? Who discretely gets a glass of water and waits at the table? Who cannot get in the shop because it isn't wheel chair accessible?

To me, the surveillance issue also looms large. The ability of instructors to monitor the presence of students on Blackboard – whether or not they made postings – seems to reinforce and strengthen the power relations in higher education, which I already consider problematic.

Finally, I feel the need to upset the idea that characteristics such as gender are unrelated to technology, education and community. For the past several decades, the body of feminist and post-colonial theory and research has challenged that assumption, arguing that epistemological differences exist and matter, and are intricately linked to power relations.

Where to From Here?

Despite the obvious limitations of this study – its tentativeness, its inconclusiveness, and its small number of participants – it offers some important insights. The analysis articulates some of the reasons why online education is a sound option for some students, but not the best option for all students (or, likely, instructors).

The analysis also reminds us that one purpose of research is to raise questions. How comfortable are students with asynchronous communication as the primary means of maintaining community? Are we creating a fiction or is there something real to virtual educational communities? Should text override subtext in these communities? Technologies are being developed continually, sometimes in unanticipated ways. Future educational technologies might make some of these questions less relevant, at the same time as they raise new questions. They might also help online educators and students better approximate the essential, most valuable elements of f2f community.

In the meantime, further research is still needed to continue addressing these questions if we are to direct online educational programs and technologies to meet needs for learning and community. Although the other participants in this study seemed comfortable with the ALGC program's reliance on asynchronous communication, there was also a general acknowledgement that, given opportunities to meet in person, students were able to build deeper connections to one another, to develop a greater sense of community and to enrich their own learning. I would encourage the ALGC faculty to develop such opportunities, even if they are infrequent. Bill's interest in holding a follow-up conference for ALGC alumni reiterates the importance of f2f contact, regardless of how successful an online educational program is, and points to one possible way in which f2f contact can be introduced and maintained for the ALGC community. Ultimately, I hope that students and faculty in future ALGC cohorts find this exploration useful, and are encouraged to ask themselves about the evolution of community and to be mindful of their role in that process.

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