LEARNING COMMUNITY OR COMMUNITY MINDED LEARNING GROUP? A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE COURSE

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the notion of community within online teaching and learning, in particular within that of online discussion. It offers a review of conceptions of community across different settings and, following Rovai (2001a), considers that an online learning community should show spirit, trust, interaction and learning. The notion of community is then explored within a case study of a Masters level online course on action research taught at a distance from a public University in USA. This course encouraged practitioners with different roles in education to begin action research projects to develop their professional practice. A multi-method approach was taken to explore the actions and perceptions of course participants. Findings are organised around the four elements of spirit, trust, interaction and learning with each element described and elaborated in the context of the study. It is suggested that there were elements of community within the course but interaction was limited by time and course requirements. It is further suggested that the course better illustrates the idea of a community minded practitioner learning group, rather than a community, and the strengths and weaknesses of this characterisation are set out.

KEYWORDS: Community, sense of community, learning group

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INTRODUCTION

Online community has only been made possible by changes in technology going back twenty or thirty years. In the early 1970s, Murray Turoff (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978) designed the first computer conferencing system to facilitate group communication and information exchanges. Since then opportunities for forming and maintaining group interaction, across distances of location and time, have caught the attention of many researchers in educational contexts (e.g. Mason & Kaye, 1989; Hiltz, 1994). Kaye (1989), for example, suggested that computer conferencing could be used as a powerful tool to promote collaborative learning and envisioned a type of community where individuals would weave ideas and information together. Similarly Harasim (1990) stressed, if carefully designed, computer conferences could support and facilitate collaborative learning. A feature of this early work was the optimism (Mason & Kaye, 1989) associated with any movement seeking a shift of paradigm (Snell, Hodgson, & Mann, 1987). In practice, as for example Mason's (2000) historical review of experiences at the Open University in the United Kingdom shows, there were continued barriers and difficulties associated with teaching and learning through computer conferencing. Nevertheless, early use of conferencing, as Thorpe (2002) observed, marked the beginning of a wave of online courses in which dialogue and collaboration were emphasised.

Nowadays, the use of online discussion is commonplace in many courses using both distance learning and blended approaches. In this sense there is an obvious overlap between technological developments, which have made interaction between learners possible, and a growing pedagogical interest in establishing communities of learners. A body of research now exists to substantiate that community is important and desirable to the success of online learners (e.g. Conrad, 2005; Brook, 2004; Lee, 2004). The aim of this paper is to explore the idea of community and assess its value in understanding a postgraduate online course recently taught at a public University in the USA. The paper is organised into literature review; background to the case study; methodology; findings; and concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term community has a long tradition and is used in a range of fields such as sociology, anthropology and education (Barab, Baek, Schatz, Scheckler, Moore, & Job-Sluder, 2003), but perhaps due to this multidisciplinary perspective it is difficult to reach consensus on the central meaning of the term (Havelock, 2004). Among the variety of definitions available, Wiesenfeld (1996) suggests that communities share a common characteristic, "the concept of we as a totality of people who are clearly set apart from them…" (p. 338). Puddifoot (1996) claims that it is not possible to produce a definitive definition of community as it is impossible to accommodate all the standpoints. Others believe that a definition should be weak, inclusive and neutral (Selznick, 1996), loose and neutral (Bruckman & Jensen, 2002) or both inclusive and strong (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

Despite the ongoing debate, there is consensus that a community is a sense rather than a tangible entity (Sarason, 1974; Wiesenfeld, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Goodfellow, 2005). Community is fundamentally a construct that resides in the heads of each member of a particular group (Puddifoot, 1996) and cannot exist prior to its members' actions (Wiesenfeld, 1996). There is also acceptance that a community may be classified as either territorial or relational (Brook, 2004; Gusfield, 1975). Territorial communities appear within the context of location, physical territory and geographical continuity, such as town or neighbourhood (Gusfield, 1975). Relational communities are identified in terms of people who interact to achieve a common purpose (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). While the two types of communities are not exclusive, and both dimensions can coexist, a relational community can be created by common goals without reference to location (Lee, 2004). It is therefore the relational community extending beyond geographical location that includes the virtual community (Brook, 2004).

Virtual communities

Virtual communities do not rely on face to face encounters, though members of the community may choose occasionally to meet face to face (Preece, 2000). Interaction is the primary means for connecting individuals virtually and computer networks support and mediate the interactions (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Despite the acceptance that community is not strictly dependent on a physical location, there are competing visions of what exactly community means (Havelock, 2004). The number of communities available online is enormous (Preece, 2000) and of many types (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Individuals join

virtual communities for different purposes such as to share information on similar interests, to make friends, or socialise with others (Preece, 2000). However, participating in a virtual community and maintaining membership implies a different process to participation in a face to face community, and may be difficult for some (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In the virtual environment "…we leave our bodies behind" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 3) and some online groups may never establish a sense of community (Baym, 1998). Nonetheless, there is a potential for creating community online even if it is not an automatic or an easy process, and may be short-lived (Cole, 2002).

Online learning community

In the context of education, the concept of virtual community has been adopted in both formal and informal contexts (Goodfellow, 2005). For instance, within formal educational environments, the focus of this study, the primary purpose of creating a community is to support collaborative learning among students (Ludwig-Hardman, 2003; Goodfellow, 2005) and this leads to a view of a learning community that differs substantially from other kinds of communities on the Internet (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thronam & Dunlap, 2004; Goodfellow, 2005). Students enrolled in courses in an educational institution can cohere into communities (Wilson, 2001) in which they are assigned for a fixed period of time (e.g. term or semester) or sometimes as they complete a set of courses together (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thronam & Dunlap, 2004). Participation is required and students generally do not choose their classmates or instructors (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thronam & Dunlap, 2004). In most cases, community is supported largely through asynchronous discussion groups (Wallace, 2003).

Definitions of online learning community vary widely (Wallace, 2003) making it difficult to reach a shared understanding of the term (Hill, 2002). Swan and Shea (2005) suggest that the most promising definitions may be those that emphasise both learning and affective aspects of the community. This bi-dimensional nature of community (Anderson, 2004) has been emphasised by Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rovai (2002). Garrison and Anderson (2003) stress that the purpose of creating a learning community is associated with the enhanced cognitive gains derived from establishing and maintaining social presence. The bi-dimensional aspect of community is also echoed in Johnson and Johnson's (1998) definition, suggesting that "Learning communities are united by a common cause of mutual support and learning, and by shared values and experiences" (p.4). These communities offer an

opportunity for learning within an environment of trust, support, common goals, and respect for diversity (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

Learning communities can provide benefits ranging from socio-emotional support to cognitive gains (Schwier, 2002; Anderson, 2004; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thronam & Dunlap, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2005). Despite the positives, it is recognised that not all communities are beneficial and healthy (Wilson, 2001). Communities, for instance, may pressure members to conform in thought and action or some members may speak loudly and inappropriately for the community. When problems occur within the group, instructors need to stay alert and act decisively and quickly when necessary (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Searching for learning community

How does one know whether a community has emerged? According to Palloff and Pratt (1999, 2005) a community is successful when there is evidence of (1) active interaction involving both social and task-oriented communication; (2) student-student interaction that supports social construction of knowledge; and (3) expressions of support and encouragement among students and an intention to evaluate critically the work of others. Similarly, Harasim (2002) suggests a community is successful when there is (1) active and sustained participation evidenced by the number of messages posted and engagement in reading and writing messages; (2) evidence of social interactions; and (3) intellectual progress and growth. Harasim's indicators are complementary and overlap in good part with those of Palloff and Pratt (1999, 2005), both focusing on active participation, social and cognitive indicators. A missing element in both Palloff and Pratt's (1999, 2005) and Harasim's (2002) indicators is the need to set boundaries which determine membership of a community (Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001; Schwier, 2002).

Some researchers have looked for evidence of community without adhering to preconceived indicators (e.g. Conrad, 2002) while others have looked for specific characteristics to explore whether a group is a community (e.g. Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001). Some (e.g. Brook, 2004; Lee, 2004) have assessed community creation using dimensions suggested by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and McMillan (1996). Within the context of education, Rovai (2001a, 2001b, 2002) has identified four essential elements to investigate students' perceptions of community in both online and classroom environments. The four elements are presented below:

1. **Spirit:** this suggests self awareness of membership of a community. Members feel a sense of belonging, identification and connection within the group (Rovai, 2001a; Wilson, 2001). There is a feeling of friendship, cohesion and satisfaction that develops among members (Rovai, 2001a). Non-involvement in the community, on the other hand, can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem and low motivation (Rovai, 2001b);

2. **Trust:** this indicates that members will feel safe to speak openly, expose gaps in their learning and will have confidence that other members will respond in supportive and constructive ways (Rovai, 2001a). It has been suggested that community formation is based to a large extent on trust (Preece, 2000; Hill, 2002; Schwier, 2002). When there is trust among individuals, relationships will develop (Preece, 2000);

3. **Interaction:** this supports both community formation and learning. Interaction can be both social and task-oriented in origin (Gilbert & Moore, 1998). Social interaction is the foundation for trust building and for a sense of belonging and connection among members which directly impacts on instructional interaction (Gilbert & Moore, 1998). An indicator of community success is when interaction among course members is frequent and consistent, and course members are engaged in active reading and writing messages (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Harasim, 2002);

4. **Learning** – this defines the special purpose of a community of learners (Anderson & Garrison, 2003; Schwier, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002). A learning community is successful when there is evidence that knowledge and meaning are actively and socially constructed (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). A strong learning community is not only based on social relationships but also occurs when members internalise the group's purpose and values (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002).

Based on the above four elements, Rovai (2001b) defines a sense of community as one in which members have feelings of belonging and trust. In such communities members believe they matter to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to one another and "they possess a shared faith that the members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared goals" (p. 107).

An analytical framework can both guide research and provide a helpful lens through which data can be interpreted (Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2004) and, in this case, Rovai's framework makes a valuable contribution to understanding community within an educational context (Wilson, 2001). Rovai (2002) himself developed a Classroom Community Index to

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measure the above four elements quantitatively and his own work appears to focus on the outcomes of a community (Wallace, 2003). Nevertheless, others have used the four elements of the framework to study community using qualitative methods (e.g. Barrett, 2003; Anderson, 2004). This study continues in the same vein. It uses the four dimensions of the framework, but uses them critically, describing and elaborating their meaning in the context of a case study. It then addresses the question of whether the participants in this particular course constituted a community.

STUDY CONTEXT

This study concerns a 13-week online Master's course taught at a university in the USA during the autumn semester 2004. The course was offered as a core requirement in one of the University's online degree programmes. The course goals were to prepare teachers, administrators and other educational practitioners to identify a problem in their practice for inquiry; design and conduct an investigation using qualitative methods; and, finally, evaluate and develop recommendations. The Learning Management System Intralearn supported the teaching and learning environment. Throughout the semester course participants worked, for the main part, using asynchronous communication within two settings: the whole-class discussion and closed small team areas. Two whole class chat sessions were also organised.

Course work was organised around a semester long project carried out within students' own work or practice contexts. The course activities were organised weekly. In the whole class areas students introduced themselves; discussed set texts; posted summaries from each small team; and raised issues related to assignments. In the small team areas, students were assigned to five groups with four or five members in each. In these small teams students peer-reviewed most draft assignments before submitting them for grading, a process which began in the fourth week of the course and extended across the semester. This course was typical of many other online courses in its design and scope. It can be seen as an example of cooperative group work in that students were working towards creating individual products but with high levels of collaboration built in through peer review and discussion of shared readings. The instructors took active roles in the whole class area by stimulating discussion and offering feedback.

METHODOLOGY

This study took an interpretative in-depth single case study approach which sought to make sense of a phenomenon (that of community) based on the meanings which participants bring to it (Merriam, 1998). Given that community is a sense rather than a tangible entity the interpretative was the only appropriate approach to take and led the researchers to observe participants' behaviours, interactions and perceptions while engaged in the activities of an online graduate course. It also led to an exploration of actions that encouraged or inhibited community development within this particular course. However, the study did not reject quantitative description, for example data on frequency of message postings. Rather, both methods were used to enable triangulation and strengthening of the investigation (Cowger & Menon, 2001; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). Nonetheless, there remained an emphasis on exploring perceptions of participants, rather than the kind of content analysis which is common, and a weakness, in much reporting of online discussion (Hammond & Wiriyapinit, 2005).

Participants

Sixteen students (14 females and two males) out of the 23 enrolled in the course gave their active consent to participate in the study. One of these 16 students left the course in week 5. Ages of students ranged from 20 to 55. Students were mostly employed as school administrators, primary, secondary and postsecondary teachers at the time of taking the course though three had other occupations or were full time students (Appendix A). Most of the students had previously attended online courses. The main instructor and her co-instructor, also female, took part in the study as well. The main instructor had considerable experience in teaching online classes while the assistant was new to this role.

Data collection

Data were collected using surveys, interviews, messages, students' products, and course documents. The study was conducted at a distance so that data were collected using the email and Web however one of the researchers had an additional face to face meeting with the main instructor.

At the beginning of the course, a Web profile form was prepared for student participants and the two instructors. Fifteen students and the two instructors returned the forms. A semi-structured initial email interview was then completed by the two instructors. The aim of the

interview was to understand how the course was designed, its objectives, the instructional strategies used and the instructors' perceptions of collaborative learning and community in general. To complement the two interviews, the online course syllabus was used as an additional data source.

Near the end of course, a Web-based survey was distributed to student participants and the two instructors. The aims of the survey were to assess students' perceptions of their online learning experience and instructors' reflections on course implementation and student participation. Although in some contexts online surveys can result in low rates of return levels, in this case both instructors and 13 out of 15 participating students returned the survey. A likely reason for this was cooperation between researchers and instructors; openness in communication with student participants throughout the course and the participants' interest in online communication. To complement the information gathered from the student Web survey, a semi-structured email interview was also conducted with ten students (all students were invited to participate) towards the end of the course. Further data sources were the messages and other documents posted by all course participants to whole-class discussion, team areas and their online chat. Quantitative data generated by the conferencing software were also collected which provided measurable levels of participation and engagement in the activities.

Data analysis

Analysis of the student and instructor questionnaires included basic descriptive statistics for each of the quantitative variables covered in the questionnaires (Appendices A and B). Qualitative data was analysed inductively, based on Merriam (1998), in which category construction began by reading documents and making notes, comments and observations in the margin of the text that appeared to address the study objective of identifying a sense of community. The next step involved grouping these comments and notes and identifying categories so that data could be coded. All the documents were transferred to the qualitative software NVIVO. Coding was performed across all documents. After coding the data in NVIVO, themes and patterns relating to sense of community were explored.

The quantity of data within the whole class discussion (N=1009 messages) and team discussions (N= 954) was substantial. In order to make the analysis manageable, six weeks from the whole class discussion area (weeks 1, 2, 7, 8, 12 and 13) and three weeks of team work (weeks 4, 7 and 10 to illustrate the beginning, middle and end of activities) were

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selected for analysis. Work inside three of the five teams was then further sampled. There was a combined total of 14 students in the three groups, 12 of whom had actively consented to participate in the study and whose messages and products were explored in depth. Analysis of messages included both quantitative and qualitative methods. Within the selected weeks (whole class and teams) the number of messages posted by participants in the study was counted using the weekly summaries produced by the conferencing software (Appendices C and D). Qualitative analysis of the messages involved two approaches. The first approach analysed the messages using the codes generated from other data sources. This allowed a focus on specific themes. The second approach involved exploring participants' behaviour and actions more inductively, looking for illustrations to strengthen the findings and unfold patterns of behaviour. Analysis of message interactivity was performed to assess patterns of interaction (such as many to many, one to many and one to one relationships).

FINDINGS

Findings are organised around the four elements suggested by Rovai: spirit; trust; interaction; learning, with the meaning of each element clarified as it emerged during the study. These are discussed below:

Spirit: this came to cover the affective element of the community, in particular a feeling of belonging and connection. This was largely generated through the experience of working in small teams, rather than taking part in whole class discussion, chat or private email. In the small team areas students felt more comfortable and said they were able to interact with others. As Maria, put it in an interview: "The teams have been outstanding. This is where much of my day-to-day interactions have happened…" while "…the [whole] class discussion board was overwhelming at times." Another, Elisa, added that "…I really enjoyed working in teams…It was helpful to work with a handful of people and really get to know their project[s]." While Marta expressed her sense of satisfaction by mailing her group: "…let me say that our team has really been WONDERFUL to work with…" The main instructor also felt that among the various tools available in the class "…what comes forward strongly is the importance of the team work, that is, small group work, sustained over time with a common core of people."

All students stated in the questionnaire that they felt connected to individuals in their small team areas (62% strongly agreeing that they felt this connection) and the majority (92%) felt

the small team activities contributed to this sense of connection. In contrast, more than half (54 %) did not feel connected to the whole class. Meanwhile, the majority of students (92%) said they felt accepted in their teams, while only 31% felt the same in the whole class discussion.

Trust: the key to trust was students' willingness to show vulnerability in the confident expectation that others in the group would respond in appropriate ways. For many, trust emerged while reviewing and discussing draft assignments produced within the teams across the weeks. It grew through feedback from others. All members of teams three and five, and a few members of team one, were eager to receive feedback right from beginning. John in team three, for example, did this by writing to his team: "Please do not hesitate to offer suggestions or critique [on] my work." This suggested a willingness to take a risk. In contrast, most members of team one only began asking for feedback once their confidence grew. Throughout the course, all members of the teams posted their drafts for others to review. Julia, for example, announced to team three: "I have posted my [Assignment B] draft and I look forward to hearing comments."

In response to their colleagues' openness, all members of the teams submitted their feedback within the specified timeline, demonstrating awareness of their responsibilities to others. This is signalled through messages such as this posting by Elisa who explained: "I have posted my review early as I will be out all day tomorrow, so I wanted to make sure that [Marta] had her comments in time." In return, all members of the teams showed appreciation of the feedback they had received. Alice mailed her colleagues: "…I really appreciate some of the criticisms because you made good points that I will certainly fix for my final draft. Thank you SO MUCH for taking the time to thoroughly critique my work." Both instructors pointed out that feedback was well received by students.

The majority of students (92%) stated in the questionnaire that the feedback from their colleagues was constructive, substantive and timely. The majority (92%) felt their colleagues' opinions mattered to them. The majority (92%) further agreed that members responded in supportive ways. Kate explained in one interview: "It also helped that they would give me constructive criticism before I handed in my work to the instructors." An issue to be explored further was the directness of peer review as raised in a comment made by Angela to her team "…we need to be even more direct with our critiques to each other…when one member began to frankly tell me of her concerns in my project, that information was great!" However other

students did not share this concern so deeply and felt that comments within the peer review were direct enough.

Interaction: this involved active, frequent and consistent engagement in activities. There was clear evidence of interaction in the course within both small teams and whole class discussion areas, and, to some extent, through other communication means (email and chat). The interaction in small teams was greater than that generated at the whole class level and there was proportionally more social and emotional exchange within small teams compared to the whole class discussion. All students agreed in the questionnaire survey that the course had more student to student interaction than instructor to student interaction. However, the role of the instructors in the whole class was important as they illustrated patterns of engagement and directed the instruction. Many students (84%) also agreed that the instructors modelled appropriate participation through their regular presence within discussion.

Across the semester (weeks 1-13), students participating in the study generated 583 messages in the whole class setting while the two instructors posted 234 messages. As for the small team discussions, these students exchanged 954 messages against 72 from the two instructors across the semester (weeks 2-13). This clearly suggests that both instructors played an active role in the whole class discussions while their presence was low in the team areas. Analysis of patterns of interaction showed that, despite the course being highly interactive, there was little inter peer discussion in these two settings. Peer review in the teams often consisted of a single response to the original posting. In the whole class, there were more students involved in the discussions across the selected weeks but the responses pointed, directly or indirectly, to the original posting. Students rarely opened up the conversation. This is exemplified in the following two messages posted in the whole class in week 8 in which both Caroline and Cecilia responded to a previous posting, by Rebecca one of the instructors, on the issue of designing interview questions. Both offer a response to the original posting but Cecilia does not prompt Caroline to develop her argument further nor does she seek feedback on her own contribution.

Caroline – "Rebecca I noticed that my "bad questions" were simply not worded clearly or were [too] broad…I think that broader questions may work on an older interviewee, but in my case I needed to set up the questions so they knew exactly what I wanted to know."

Cecilia - "In response to good and bad questions, I feel that the questions that allowed for a yes or no answer left me waiting for more… If I were to do the interview again I would have changed [those] questions to be more thought provoking and open-ended."

Learning – this came to cover students' knowledge and understanding of action research, practical application of skills in a practice context, and their reflection on their growing knowledge, skills and understanding. Learning was supported through the readings, video clips of real research projects and the interactions within the small teams. The main instructor also contributed to the process by playing an active role in the whole class and identified opportunities for supporting reflection in students' messages. She explained: "I work[ed] hard at teaching through the incidents [students] raise and that emerge in their postings." In her messages she would consciously refer to "raising the threads out" of a message, encouraging students to reflect and discuss further.

Many students began the course without an understanding of action research, Alice, for instance, explained "…I didn't even understand what the course title meant…" However, at the end of semester, the majority of the students (84%) felt confident they had gained a good understanding of the course content. Sandra confidently stated: "I know I certainly have come to a new understanding of Action Research." The co-instructor, Betty, agreed that students learned a lot about the course content and the practical aspects of using enquiry methods in their schools or other institutions. This is shown in the assignments. Maria, for example, explored through interviews, observations and photographs the impact of "looping" (keeping children for with the same teacher for more than one year) in her primary school. She felt that: "Through the data collected, I have learned a great deal about the perceptions [at] my school…" The main instructor, Rebecca, felt that the assignments helped students to learn what was appropriate, both in terms of methodology and courses of action, for their circumstances. However, she was aware of the individual nature of the assignments and explained: "I am concerned that they are not being put in the position of having to hammer out interpretation from joint materials."

As a result of the interactions within the teams, 76% of the students stated in the questionnaire that they had reached new levels of understandings about the issues being studied in the course. Many (77%) agreed that being exposed to different perspectives challenged their own thinking. All agreed that reviewing the work of others helped them to reflect and re-evaluate their own work (with 62% strongly agreeing). All further agreed that

the critiques offered by their colleagues sharpened their understanding of their work. Cecilia, for example, added in an interview: "I was also presented with some comments that required me to think a little more in-depth about the responses I received to my interview questions. Thanks to the critique I received I can see both sides." While Angela suggested: "…I have picked up ideas and I have gained insight as I critique one other person's work."

Many students also felt that the video clips on real research projects analysed in week 8, along with the readings from the course book, helped them to better understand the course content. Marta felt the videos "…made [her] understand the power of what we've been doing all along." Anne felt the case studies in the class textbook "…provided [her] with another way to think about [her] own research and to put the pieces together…"

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rovai proposed that a community should show evidence of spirit, trust, interaction and learning. The meaning associated with each of these four terms is subject to interrogation, but this remains a useful framework mixing both affective and cognitive dimensions. In the reported case study spirit was in evidence in the sense of comfort and acceptance that students felt towards each other and their sense of connection with their peers, though this was much more evident in a small group context. Trust was present in the willingness of students, and indeed instructors, to expose their vulnerability, having the confidence that others would be helpful, honest, open and reliable. Interestingly, this was a kind of swift trust (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996) in which students quickly focused on what others brought to the team task rather than spend time exploring personal histories and interests. Swift trust appears as based more on cognitive than on interpersonal relationships (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996). Interaction was present in that students and instructors were sending, commenting and reflecting on messages. However there were limitations, in particular few genuine many to many interactions were observed, primarily due to time constraints and quite intensive coursework requirements. Learning took place through knowledge and understanding of course material; through reflection on that material; through practical application in the workplace; and through reflection on that application in the workplace. Learning was best seen as a bringing together of course material; self reflection; peer feedback; and action and feedback in a practice context. This was not social learning as understood as process of social participation in a community of practice (Wenger,

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McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) but rather individual learning in a social context or, to be more accurate, in two contexts i.e. both the course and practice environments.

The four elements of community were clearly visible in the course but there were qualifications: limits on interaction between members and a focus on individual learning. Community, as seen earlier, is a word often used in reports of studies of this kind, but can it be usefully applied to this course? On one hand, *community* of learners is a more useful term than *class, cohort* or *group* as it signifies that there is a sense of spirit and trust within the group, as well as a commitment to cooperative practice, which far exceeds that which is reported, or expected, in many more didactic, teacher-centred courses, both online and face to face. However, the word community may imply too much, particularly regarding the nature of interaction and may suggest alignment with the idea of community of practice. It would be more accurate to say that members of this course were *community minded*, rather than a community. This recognises the spirit and trust generated between all participants but acknowledges the individual nature of their learning. More specifically the study provides an example of a community minded practitioner learning group (CMPLG) with a focus on bringing together practice and course based learning. A CMPLG is here defined as one:

- that generates spirit and trust between members;

- that is a closed group in which members will receive accreditation of some kind;

- in which activities are structured by a group leader and this group leader models support for reflection;

- that creates levels of interaction so that all, or nearly all, members contribute, reflect and feedback on the work of others in the group. In this way it supports individual learning in a group context ;

- in which members are constrained by time and commitments on their participation;

- that encourages action in a practice context and supports reflection on that action.

The study happens to be an example of a CMPLG undertaken in an online context but the same principles might also apply to other face to face courses as well. The term CMPLG is an ungainly one, but useful in conveying both a sense of community and an awareness of the limitations on that sense of community. A wider question is how far course members and course providers should aspire to a deeper sense of community? A short answer in this case

study is that a deeper sense of community could only be achieved by redesigning coursework tasks on a more collaborative basis with a focus on creating joint products and procedures. However, it is difficult to see how such a level of collaboration could be achieved without taking away the opportunity for each student to develop tools and skills in ways they felt best fitted into their individual practice context. This mix of individual learning in a social context appeared both powerful and well received by students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Student Profile

Age Group	%	Job	%	Experience with online courses	%
20-25	20	School administrator	27	None	13
26-30	20	Primary teacher	33	1	20
36-40	7	Secondary teacher	13	2	13
41-45	20	Postsecondary teacher	7	3	20
46-50	20	FT postgraduate	7	More than 3	33
51-55	13	Other	13		

Appendix B – Student questionnaire

Statement	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Small group activities contributed to create a sense of connection with others in the course			8	46	46
I felt connected to the whole group in this course	8	46	23	23	
I felt connected to more specific individuals				38	62
I felt accepted in my team group			8	31	62
I felt accepted by the whole group			69	23	8
The contributions of my colleagues were constructive and substantive			8	31	62
The opinions of other members mattered to me			8	54	38
I received timely feedback from my class colleagues		8		54	38
I felt that members of this course responded in supportive ways			8	46	46
I felt that there was more student-student interaction rather than instructor-student interaction in this course				54	46
The instructors modelled appropriate online participation by being regularly visible in the course		8	8	38	46
I am confident I gained a good understating of course content		8	8	46	38
As a result of interaction within the group I reached new levels of understandings or changed my perceptions about the issues being studied			23	38	38
Exposure to different perspectives challenged my own thinking		8	15	46	31
Reviewing the work of others helped me to reflect and re-evaluate my own work				38	62
The critiques offered by my colleagues sharpened my understanding of my work				54	46

Appendix C – Number of messages sent by active participants in the study (n=16)

in the whole class area within selected weeks

Week	Instructor Messages	Student Messages
1	51	104
2	13	11
7	15	46
8	20	110
12	23	52
13	15	23
Total	**137**	**346**

Appendix D – Number of messages in teams 1, 3 and 5 sent by active participants in the study (12 out 14 of team members)

Team	Week	Total messages	Instructor messages	Student messages
1	4	76	3	73
1	7	38	0	38
1	10	43	0	43
3	4	30	4	26
3	7	18	0	18
3	10	11	0	11
5	4	47	6	41
5	7	19	0	19
5	10	11	0	12