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Postgraduate writing e-communities: De-marginalising remote participants

Abstract

This paper considers how building e-communities can support and socialise postgraduate learners of Writing in an online Master of Arts taught from Melbourne, Australia. Although participants may be geographically remote, active establishment and maintenance of online communities of practice can help to break down the feeling of marginalisation that online and distance learning participants report (Caplan 2003). This study uses pedagogical theories of building and maintaining e-communities born of Lave and Wenger's social constructivist thinking about communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1992; Wenger 1998) to introduce a pilot study of e-community in first year subjects in Swinburne University's Master of Arts in Writing. The pilot study draws on the insights of the university's tutors, experienced in teaching writing online, and their perceptions of postgraduate Writing students' needs to belong. In a first year core paper in the degree, learners work closely with a critical friend or in a small group to develop their Writing in the context of a selected project. This participation requires them to engage in virtual collaborations and learning e-communities. This paper shows how such an approach can de-marginalise geographically remote writers by providing insider support, harnessing common goals, encouraging shared discourse and promoting membership.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

e-community—community of practice—imagined community—postgraduate—writing

Introduction

Swinburne University's online postgraduate Writing programs accommodate students from the far reaches of Australia with many enrolees coming from the major cities and their margins. Further, some students who want to write but are time-poor, report that physical isolation and geographical marginalisation impact on their ability to participate in face-to-face communities. This marginalisation prevents them from receiving 'critically friendly' or professional feedback. They discover online programs, but students' geographic isolation and feelings of marginalisation pose additional challenges for learning writing online. The challenge is partly pedagogic. It is a challenge to apply such strategies as peer reviewing or using class members as resources and mentors. It is challenging, too, to encourage students to invest in a learning process using remote e-peer and e-community support. It is a challenge about creating and sustaining online partnerships and communities of writers to facilitate learning.

This paper discusses a project investigating whether building e-partnerships and e-communities can support and socialise postgraduate Writing students who live or feel on the margins. It will engage with social constructivist and poststructuralist thought about learning communities and the fostering of identities. The learners may be remote in distance but not necessarily in investment and engagement. An additional challenge, then, is to de-marginalise those who feel disadvantaged by geography and time. This paper identifies strategies for creating and maintaining effective e-communities for 'marginalised' postgraduate Writing students.

Community

Defining "community" takes a book (Putnam 2000; Block 2008). I consider community 'a set of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable "we-feeling"' (Foster 1996: 25). Communities' defining elements are *mutual interdependence, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values* and goals and *overlapping life histories* (Rovai 2002a: 4). Communities can be real or imagined, real or virtual. They can be communities of practice (CoPs), which can be communities of interest, purpose and passion (Tu & Corry 2002, 209). Communities are constructed by interaction and are sites of individual and collective identity (Cohen 1985: 118). As Hung and Der-Thanq write, 'People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something—a need, a common shared goal and identity' (2001: 3).

The e-communities in this project are conceptualised in relation to social constructivism's "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998; Brown & Duguid 2000). Characteristically, expert learning occurs through peripheral participation in communities. Persistent participation motivates learners to reach goals through strategic alliances with and within communities. Learning how to access community resources (peer mentoring, expert/lecturer supervision) can have collective and individual impacts on motivation (Tu & Corry 2002; Augar, Raitman & Zhou 2002; Lapointe & Reisetter 2008).

The concept of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983; Norton, 2001, 2009; Kanno & Norton 2003; Pavlenko & Norton 2005) can also be applied to virtual communities. Here, peers work online towards similar course outcomes and personal goals (Foster 1996: 25). A culture's sense of community is an imagined space and individuals idealise community to create a sense of self through imagining. There are connections between imagined community and desired identity since 'the organization of the self is the foundation of the communicative effect' (Foster 1996: 26).

The concepts of "CoP" and "imagined community" fit with frameworks focussing on learning through participation. The situating of learning in the social world derives from Lave and Wenger's constructivist theories of learning and identity (1991, 1998). Poststucturalist theories of investment and learner identity (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Ivanic 1997; Norton 2000, 2009) sit alongside constructivist models of identity negotiation. Learning Writing in e-communities is a participative, situated, social process.

"Community" embraces the Wengerian features of *support, common goals, shared discourse* and *desire for membership and relatedness* (Rovai, 2002b: 321). Tu and Corry devise a framework for e-learning communities:

> It is believed that in a community, learning occurs as a social process. In an eLearning community, members work together to solve their problems and to improve their communities using knowledge construction media and technology (2002: 209).

What, then, are "learning communities"? Participating together, sharing the same outcomes and learning horizontally characterise learning communities (Tu & Corry 2002: 210). Saragina (1999) provides a definition:

> Various kinds of individuals interacting in a common location for the purpose of gaining knowledge in, understanding of, or skill in a subject matter through instruction, study, and/ or experience by the creation of a social state and condition that nurtures or encourages learners (online).

E-communities are 'groups of people with common interests that communicate regularly, and for some duration, in an organised way, over the Internet' (Scott & Johnson 2005: 1).

E-learning communities of graduate writers

This study examines the effectiveness of e-communities in a Masters in Writing delivered by Swinburne University and the Open University of Australia (OUA). The course uses Course Management System (CMS) *Blackboard* as a virtual environment for establishing the potential learning community. The base comprises conference areas where threaded discussions are negotiated. These enable students to belong to the e-community, boosting confidence and furthering communication with others (George 2002: 16). The asynchronous discussion forum, fuelled by stimulating cues and associated lectures, links and readings, is a site for student assertions, responses, reflections and exchanges. It is regularly facilitated, monitored and mediated by the

instructor, who also offers individual and generic feedback and encourages fruitful collaborations.

Investment, community and identity

Finding "voice" is part of negotiating identity in socio-cultural contexts and central to social identity formation in community (Wenger 1998). Establishing presence through synchronous and asynchronous attendance, supportive comments to others and individual postings are ways to establish identity in e-communities. Packer and Goicochea (2000) identify the link: 'the socio-cultural conception of identity addresses the fluid character of human beings and the way identity is closely linked to participation and learning in the community' (2000: 229). Brown and Duguid (2000) establish three principles for learning in communities. It is *demand-driven, a social act* and *an act of identity formation.* Connell argues: 'when learning is viewed as social co-operation, the focus is on each individual constructing their identity within the social space of the learning group' (251).

Being or becoming invested is central to both identity formation and the feeling of belonging that brings participants inwards from the margins. This project involves students who need to know that there is something *in* participation for them, some new discourses to invest in. For many writers, this is refinement or new understanding of their voice. For others, this involves refocussing their too-comfortable voice. Crucially, an invested trust in the learning context can empower them. Notably, trust is an implicit rule of all CoPs (Hung & Nichani 2002: 26). It facilitates cooperation for mutual benefit. An e-learning community can provide essential elements of support and belonging (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000; Sloman & Reynolds 2002; Rovai 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry 2002; Augar, Raitman & Zhou 2004; LaPointe & Reisetter 2008). These elements suggest the connection between participation, investment and individual and collective identity.

In e-communities, investment indicates personal and scholastic success and appears vital to lessening marginalisation. Instructors do, however, need to engage students in the community and maintain engagement (Rovai 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry 2002; Augar, Raitman & Zhou 2004). According to Rovai (2002b), 'a strong sense of community can be created by a combination of facilitation skills, team-building activities, and group interaction' (331). The needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied for each individual. In a study of "belonging online", LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) emphasise online students need a community to achieve optimal learning (652). Instructors should build on learners' varied investments, encouraging communications among more and less invested individuals.

Participants who report negatively about learning in e-communities tend either to be dissatisfied with the amount or quality of their individual feedback or with the perfunctoriness of peer interactions (LaPointe & Reisetter 2008). Being involved in instructor and peer communication is central to e-belonging but web technology cannot fulfil needs for intimate interaction (Scott & Johnson 2005: 6). Some will always feel marginalised. Yet there is evidence that others may be psychosocially isolationist by preference (Rovai 2002a; Caplan 2003). Regardless of whether

participants are naturally social or isolationist, harnessing the potential of e-learning communities aids learning (Hung & Der-Thanq, 2001; Tu & Corry 2002; George 2002; Gallien & Oomen-Early 2008).

Despite the logistical advantages of online education, its seeming marginalisation of participants and its lack of immediacy deter some learners (Augar, Raitman & Zhou 2004, LaPointe & Reisetter 2008; Gallien & Oomen-Early 2008). There are requirements for the instructor to work fast in building community, inviting all to participate both collectively (via e-announcements) and individually (via emails) and ensuring that participants receive both individuated new objects of learning and specific feedback on their responses, contributions and thoughts.

Real and imagined CoPs

Learning communities share the properties of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1992; Wenger, 1998). Researchers have applied this model to e-learning (Hung & Nichani 2002; McConnell 2002, Rovai 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry 2002; Gallien & Oomen-Early 2008). Hung and Nichani (2002), however, maintain that online communities, lacking the FTF and group-organisational components, are only 'quasi CoPs' (25). "CoPs" have three elements: *relations among persons, activity and the world, existence over time and relation to other communities* (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98). In such communities, new members move from being "apprentices" with "legitimate peripheral participation" to 'the whole person acting in the world' (98, 49). Like the new members of CoPs, learners in e-environments are participants in the evolving practices of social communities. As Rovai (2002a) writes, 'learning represents the common purpose of the community as members … grow to value learning and feel that their educational needs are being satisfied through active participation' (6).

Wenger (1998) identified three characteristics of CoPs. These are *mutual engagement* (the regular interactions of community members), *joint enterprise* (members' common endeavours, goals, visions or pursuits) and *shared repertoire* (ways of thinking, speaking, expressing, remembering common to the community). The regularity of a CoP's mutual engagement allows learners to enter (as apprentices) and continue in (as participants) these communities. The joint enterprise, a goal-oriented, mutually supportive group investment, ensures that members communicate meaningfully, guide new members and negotiate knowing. The community's shared repertoire contains information that participants access, share and reflect on. In an e-environment, the virtual space containing the curricular information alongside the students' artefacts and collaborations represents the shared repertoire of the community (Prasolova-Førland & Divitini 2003: 58).

The concept of "imagined communities" complements this framework, enabling understanding that learners' investment in a present community can impact both on future membership in a desired future community and on the individual and personal education they need to undertake in order to warrant future memberships. The imagined community of people, analogous to nationhood (Anderson 1983), can be seen as groups 'not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect

through the power of the imagination' (Kanno & Norton 2003: 241). This framework allows for desires to *belong* and *become* despite being on the margins.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper is based on a pilot study providing focus and direction for a new study investigating the effectiveness of a range of tutor interactions in building e-community in a first year subject ('Critical friends') in a Master of Arts in Writing run jointly by Swinburne University and the Open University of Australia (OUA) in Melbourne. Enrolees fall into two key groups: recent university graduates who have not yet found their vocation, and late career graduates seeking either a return to a subject they loved at school or a new set of skills for career change. Current qualitative data consists of survey responses to questionnaires sent to 10 tutors. The tutors were asked about the challenges of online writing, students' support needs, ways to foster e-community and the usefulness of belonging for developing writers. A grounded methodological approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Glaser 1998) is employed to isolate key themes that take the form of insider observations, concerns and pedagogical suggestions in both the tutor and student data.

Findings

Emerging from the current data are the following themes about the capital of e-community.

community or no community

Many students choose e-learning because it removes the threat of face and encourages them to commit to a non-threatening screen. There is evidence that the sense of community gained is a bonus. As tutors say,

> The sense of community is highly constructive. Students relax and feel easier, ask more questions, find their own experiences relevant and learn more effectively. Many are amazed at the sense of community that can emerge through the digital environment

> … For many the sense of community between the students is the most important and valuable aspect of the course – and a completely unexpected bonus.

There is consensus that sharing experience is a key to building e-community. Some students believe Writing is a solitary occupation and select e-learning because of its isolation. Here are two tutor responses:

> When people enrol in a distance-learning course, they assume a high-degree of individual responsibility for their learning, working with prepared materials to learn the terms, concepts, and skills presented there.

> I don't know if a 'feeling of community' is totally necessary for students to succeed in this course – having said that, the best way is to achieve this is to encourage students to exchange opinions with one another and to respond to their queries and tutorials promptly.

But while there may be a real possibility that some students do not want to be part of a learning community, learning through participation offers ontological benefit:

> The course encourages them to think of themselves as writers from day 1 – and this is an important step in the development of their practice.

> All writing students are probably by definition centred on their writerly selves.

It is clear that encouraging students' identities is crucial:

> Feeling the need to be competent requires that the students challenge their beliefs, actions, and imagination, hence a tutor should never do is to criticise students harshly.

This may be true in e-environments and in interactions about creativity. Yet there is contradictory data about desire for community. When asked what the greatest challenge facing students enrolled online, the most common response was "isolation" (followed by "technology"). It's true that learning communities foster growth through increased interaction and feedback but some writers may only desire self-introspection and their tutor.

collaboration on writing

Collaboration with peer and tutor emulates the relationship between a professional reader and a writer, but while students trust the expertise of their tutors, they need to learn to invest and trust in collaborations with peers:

> Tutors need to demonstrate that working collaboratively on each other's texts has mutual benefits for all participants, as well as building writerly autonomy.

Receiving a critical response from a peer may be crucial but there is room for critical responsiveness from a tutor:

> The tutor should always provide positive criticism and say encouraging words whenever possible. This will make students feel competent and it will definitely do wonders to their motivation.

Peer collaboration works with expert tuition alongside it. Seven respondents say "a vibrant group" is the key factor. Tutor collaboration with individuals emerges as a key dynamic. The tutors describe their own role when asked about the challenges facing online writing students:

> The tutor can focus on working with students to master the content by using directed discussion to answer questions, stimulate critical reflection, and most importantly, give the student high-quality feedback and assessment of … performance on assignments.

threaded discussions and community

Contributing to discussion boards allows learners to speak candidly:

> The relative facelessness of discussion boards allows participants to take risks and become devil's advocates, perhaps asking open questions they might not ask in a face to face tutorial.

Discussion boards enable feedback from peers with a range of experience, some of which is as valuable as the tutor's. There is a consensus that 'other students are a welcome support' but that learning from participation in forums depends on investment in the group.

As indicated above, in order for a community to evolve, there needs to be particular interventions, particularly in the early stages, by the instructor/tutor/moderator.

> Allowing students to interact with the tutor (and with other students) if they have queries. This makes them feel more in control and improve their learning skills.

Tutors can foster community through a range of strategies. A key strategy is 'asking open questions to draw members to a common line of discussion'. There are others:

> Helping them to feel 'at home' online through reassurance… Treating them as equals… Sharing of achievements – both student and tutor.

There is the suggestion that the potential for learning via collaboration can be increased if there is 'more emphasis on joint critique/work interchange via the workshop space'.

drawing on imagined communities

The majority of learners desire to be part of larger, professional e-communities and real writerly communities. Five tutor responses concur. One identifies vibrant linkages to other writing communities' as a need: 'Feeling part of the professional writing community can allow students entrée and mentoring in a very competitive and nepotistic industry.' Having tutors who are bridges to such communities is part of this desire: Students need to feel that the tutors offer real experience and expertise as well as good online teaching skills.' Another recommends 'that students join a professional organisation, such as the Writers' Centre in their state, or the AWG or similar'. Three others mention their perceived need for 'increased opportunities for inclusion in a published magazine for our writing students & broader community'.

Discussion: Harnessing community

Being able to harness the potential of learning e-communities presents opportunities for instructors and students. Since the learning is situated and involves CoP participation, its benefits may not be predictable, but the unpredictability of situated learning means that rewards for investors. These rewards may be educational or ontological or even a feeling of belonging and hence "de-marginalising". Students may gain insights into how they can perform in the industry and how they can learn from the interactions of core community members. They may also gain heightened understandings of their own ability as agential individuals. When learners benefit

from collegiality and mutuality in the virtual community, they gain self-confidence, feeling nearer to reaching a desired imagined CoP and being closer to having their texts scrutinised professionally. This closeness also brings learners in from the marginal fringes.

There is much learning available in e-learning communities. Whether students unlock this potential depends on participating in mutual engagements, joint enterprise, and shared repertoires. "Shared repertoire" is particularly important considering that it contains capital that helps learners access imagined communities. The combined knowledge of tutors and community members might offer websites to view, conferences to attend, competitions to enter, real and e-communities to join. This shared repertoire is the knowledge made, made available for and owned by that learning community. Many learners meet their peers in other virtual environments *(Messenger, Twitter, Facebook)* and some personally meet community members. Having optional presentations of work in a social context or inviting online students to in-person PhD student presentations could be ways to achieve this.

In harnessing the potential of learning communities, instructors can follow a range of principles:

- Ensure learners know *how* to participate in their learning community
- Ensure that participation *starts well*
- Work on *maintaining* learning communities
- Consider *imagined communities* as well as learning community
- Review and reflect on the community's *lifespan*
- Consider the *individuals* who comprise the community

Conclusions

This study presents a context where e-learning that harnesses "community" brings students closer to achieving course outcomes that match personal goals. At the same time, investing in community can afford learners incidental but invaluable windows into their own creative and humanitarian potential. This paper uses the concepts, "CoP" and "imagined community", to suggest investment in the learning community is crucial if participants are to achieve future goals beyond the lifespan of the present community. Instructor interventions such as suggestions of future work and literary communities are invaluable. Further, understanding *situated* learning communities helps instructors conceptualise learners' needs to "be" as well as their potential to "become" in the future. Conveying this understanding is powerful in making remote writers belong; this understanding de-marginalises. In providing learners with chances to explore identity options, instructors accord with constructivist, socio-cultural and poststructuralist notions of identity. Identities, in flux, sites of struggle, but also capable of amazing resilience, are formed and negotiated in situated social environments such as learning communities (Norton 2000, 2009; Gee 2000b). Such an approach can further demarginalise geographically remote writers by providing insider support, harnessing common goals, encouraging shared discourse and promoting membership.

A virtual environment can exploit a range of learning and teaching interactions and transactions, and in so doing can maximise a sense of community and minimize isolation. Belongingness and membership offer long-lasting benefits to students of writing. Not all enrolees may desire this degree of participation and seek a mode of enquiry where they can receive input and achieve self-development in a remote or isolated context. While they might not desire to be a part of the e-community, they do desire to become published writers, and to join those elite ranks. This may not demonstrate a desire for an imagined community, but it certainly suggests an imagined future self.

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