

Chapter 5.16

Entering the Virtual Teachers' Lounge: Social Connectedness among Professional Educators in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

As communication and connection are essential instruments for professional educators, this chapter seeks to examine the effectiveness of an online “virtual teacher’s lounge” in the framework of offline communities. Essentially, an online discussion forum for educators is evaluated for the purpose of determining whether the forum provides a “space” conducive for the development of a community of professional educators as benchmarked against an understanding of offline community formation and existence. The foundational works of Ferdinand Tonnies, James Coleman, and Ray Oldenburg are used to develop 12 characteristics of community—as understood in the context of social communities. The study finds that online communities closely resemble offline communities in structure and interaction, but only for select participants. The participants observed demonstrating or facilitating the characteristics of community comprise around 10% of the total number of users participating in the analyzed discussions.

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INTRODUCTION

As globalization continues to bring more individuals to computer-mediated communication (CMC) of interaction as found in the phenomenon of the Internet, the education community must continue to embrace the technologies that exist to better address social, pedagogical, and professional needs. The United Kingdom has looked to technologies as cornerstones of recent educational reforms (Selwyn, 2006). It is only reasonable for the educational community, speaking in general terms here, to purposefully explore the latest technological innovations as possible means of assisting in communication for the purposes of professional development, collaborative support in pedagogical and social contexts, and for the discovery and connections of important content expertise. These tools can prove to be the connecting points between education professionals on opposite sides of the globe and around the literal corner. The challenge is to properly determine the most important and effective methods to allow educators the opportunity to effectively use resources and time to best meet the needs and demands of the 21st century.

This chapter examines significant developments in the specific context of the communication needs of professional educators as met by naturally-forming virtual environments. The primary question asked is whether virtual environments can serve the social needs of educators – essentially becoming virtual teacher's lounges, or more generally educational “third places” (see Oldenburg, 1991). This question is addressed through a primarily qualitative study, examining a single naturally forming educational community in an online environment.

The included background section creates a framework in which to evaluate an online discussion forum and its efficacy as a social community of professional educators. This chapter will review the sub-questions of the research – 12 characteristics – in terms of analytical findings and synthetic conclusions. Conversational analysis and general observational techniques are employed to accomplish this study's goals. Further analysis of context illuminates other areas of interest as part of this study's execution.

BACKGROUND

The true nature of community promotes copious debate; or specifically, debate centers on whether community exists today as it once did, whether it will ever exist as it once did, and whether community has dynamically evolved and has therefore adopted a new meaning (Bauman, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

As the 1998 edition of the Dictionary of Sociology notes, “the concept of community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common — usually a common sense of identity” (Marshall, 1998). Identity is an important component of the formation of and participation in community. The perception of self, the subsequent behavior, and the juxtaposition of self with others all are vital concepts to understanding community

(Bauman, 2003; Turkle, 1995). Community really can be considered a relationship between identity and the formed relationships with that identity.

George Hillery notes in *Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement in Rural Sociology* (1955), “there is one element, however, which can be found in all of the concepts . . . all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement” (Marshall, 1998). So communities are built upon relationships among individuals, aside from specific interests, geographical proximity, or necessity. None of these elements are present in agreed-upon definitions. This is particularly important for the pursuit of an understanding of computer-mediated communication (CMC)-based community formation.

Offering a different perspective, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) argues that the sense of community depends upon a community not knowing it is a community. This community must evolve “naturally” and not be artificially manufactured. Once realization occurs, then community is no longer pliable and that real community becomes something entirely different (Bauman, 2001, pp. 10-13). Grossman et al. actually attempted to fabricate such a community in an urban educational environment (2001). However, forced construction does not a community make.

Turning to an analysis of community, Bauman separates communities into two basic types: aesthetic and ethical. Aesthetic communities are formed as temporary, often based on an “idol.” Membership in these communities remains non-committal. Ethical communities, on the other hand, are communities that are based on rules, allowing members to experience security, safety, and certainty (Bauman, 2001, pp. 59-73), thus creating stronger ties.

Marshall's (1998) focus is on the distinction between community and society, which is important in this discussion. This distinction is made through sociological terms, coined by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1893, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Harris, 2001). The former denotes

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