

Chapter 6

A Methodological Approach for Blended Communities: Social Network Analysis and Positioning Network Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The current diffusion of blended communities, characterized by the integration of online and offline interactions, has made necessary a methodological reflection about the suitable approaches to explore psychosocial dynamics in virtual and real communities. In this chapter we propose a mixed approach that 'blends' qualitative and quantitative methods: by combining qualitative content analysis with Social Network Analysis we investigate participation dynamics and by employing this methodological combination in an original way we create an innovative method, called Positioning Network Analysis, to examine identity dynamics. We will describe the characteristics of this methodological device, providing some examples in order to show the manifold use of these original tools.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last years there has been a growing development of new models of communities, innovated by the use of technologies. Recently the integration of Computer Mediated Communication technologies in face to face communities has produced blended models (Ligorio & Annese, in press; Ligorio & Sansone, 2009) of communities. They originate in educational contexts with

Blended Learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006), but are now spreading in other contexts, particularly in professional ones.

The mixture of face to face and mediated interactions triggers psychosocial dynamics such as the sense of belonging to the community and the subsequent identity construction process (Ligorio, Annese, Spadaro, & Traetta, 2008), that have considerable implications on learning process. Our concern for psychosocial dimensions and psychoeducational implications of blended com-

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munities is framed in a socio-cultural perspective that defines learning as a social event deriving from the participation in community life and affecting the construction of identity (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Our interest for the psychological processes emerging in blended communities engages us in a new research trend (Annese, Traetta & Spadaro, 2010; Ligorio, *et al.*, 2008) looking for appropriate methodological procedures. The aim of this chapter is to propose a unique methodological approach to observe blended communities. It is a distinctive approach because it does not simply mix qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but it employs a quantitative tool in a qualitative way; it tries to qualitatively interpret a quantitative method. In this sense it could be interesting for qualitative scholars who are looking for new methodological modes, able to represent their epistemological attitude towards knowledge building.

BACKGROUND

Blended Learning between Community and Identity

The socio-cultural definition of learning as participation and acculturation (Bruner, 1966, Wenger, 1998), stressing the importance of the social context where negotiating meanings, recalls a suitable conceptual framework consisting of the construct of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) and the theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans, 1996; 2001).

The definition of learning as an intersubjective process, given by the involvement of participants in a meaningful interaction (Matusov, 2001), well fits with the perspective proposed by Wenger (1998): learning is a social process deriving from the participation in community practices, a process triggering an increasing sense of belonging to the community.

The concept of CoP helps to study learning by highlighting community's participation trajectories through the model of "Legitimate Peripheral Participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A crucial node in this model is the degree of appropriation of community's culture affecting the kind of participation of community members in social practices. Newcomers can move in a double participation trajectory: from the periphery to the centre and from the centre to the periphery. A newcomer can progressively increase his/her degree of appropriation of community's culture, passing from a peripheral participation to a central one; at the same time he/she can also decrease his/her degree of appropriation of community's culture, passing from a central participation to a peripheral one. For example, a research study of ours, about the socialization process of a newcomer in a professional community (Traetta & Annese, *in press*), shows discursive markers of his central participation—such as repair mechanisms addressed to others's turns (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) or the use of the pronoun "we" implying a strong sense of belonging to the community. At the same time some signals—such as conversational markers subduing strong statements—prove his persisting peripheral participation. Spadaro and Ligorio (2005) find that the objective of the interaction can influence the participation trajectories of newcomers. The different kinds of trajectory can depict a participation that is not always progressive and linear. In short, participation is a learning process mutually accomplished by individuals and community and supplying both of them with identity resources.

They shape each other through the sense of belonging sprung from "common enterprises" (Wenger, 1998). Their active involvement in social interactions leads community members to consider themselves as part of a unit, their strong "sense of community" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) allows them to negotiate individual and collective identities. By participating, community members dialogically position and think themselves in

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