

Chapter 8

Community Embodied: Validating the Subjective Performance of an Online Class

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ABSTRACT

Problematizing the historical, philosophical, and social foundations of online communities, this project lays out a theoretical framework of subjective performance in virtual spaces and uses it to examine interactions in one long-distance college class. The findings of this cyberethnographic study suggests that even though the collective perceptions of community remain relatively stable, yet idealized and evasive, the actual individual manifestations of online community are limited to the subjective performances of the members and are inseparable from their complex identities and literacies. Therefore, considering the subjective performances of online community is vital for understanding its goals, practices, principles, and limitations and critical for the assessment of its success.

EXAMINING THE HYPE

The study of online collaboration has been a true companion of research projects on online teaching and learning. First envisioned by Licklider and Taylor in 1968 (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004), online (or virtual) communities have now become “an accepted part of the lives of Internet users” (Bishop, 2007, p. 1881). Studies of communal interactions have emerged and thrived across

academic disciplines. Referring to the hype surrounding the exploration of online communities across the academic and professional worlds, Shumar and Renninger (2002) note that theorists, researchers, and practitioners of seemingly unrelated backgrounds and interests are equally enthused by the study of “the community enabled by the Internet” (p. 1). A number of studies, early and recent (e.g., Baym, 1998; Jones, 2002; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Nagel, Blignaut, & Cronje, 2009), have invested significant effort into exploring

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questions ranging from whether online communities are to be built or if they “occur on their own, ‘organically,’” to whether online communities are “imagined” or “real” (Jones, 2002, p. 368). Others have placed emphasis on the impossibility to analyze the virtual outside the “real” (e.g., Davis, Seider, & Gardner, 2008; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and critiqued the treatment of online community as “a separate reality” and “an isolated social phenomenon,” not taking into account how interaction on the Net fits other aspects of people’s lives (Jones, 2002, p. 368). Finally, a spike of research activity has been observed in the areas of online community as a cultural, gender, and age specific phenomenon (e.g., Meyers, 2009; Peowski, 2010; Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem, & Hughes, 2009; Yi, 2008), as well as such uses and benefits of online (learning) community in areas of professional development (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Karagiorgi & Lymbouridou, 2009), graduate education (Glassmeyer, Dibbs, & Jensen, 2011), parenting (Farquharson, 2011; Winarnita, 2008), or political potential (Craig, 2010; In der Smiten, 2008).

The abundance of research of online communities, however, has not been able to address many of the basic questions on the concept, the mechanisms of construction and sustainment, as well as the ways of measuring the effectiveness of a learning community online. For instance, the questions of “presence” and “learning online” have largely remained limited to examining participant perception of satisfaction and learning (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). Few studies have “elucidated the relationships among online behaviors, online roles, and online learning communities” (Yeh, 2010, p. 140). Even less has been done to examine the multiplicity of performative functions, social expectations and user subjectivities embedded in the fabric of virtual interactions (Kehrwald, 2010; Liao & Hsieh, 2011; Saltmarsh-Sutherland-Smith, 2010). A dated statement by Wellman and Gulia (1999), therefore, has held true for over a decade:

The subject [on online community formation and functioning] is important: practically, scholarly, and politically. The answers have not yet been found. Indeed, the questions [emphasis added] are just starting to be formulated. (p. 188)

The embeddedness of online community in the experiences of everyday life and its reflection of and influence on the communication practices and patterns of identity formation make online community a colossal research enterprise that requires continuous investigation and theorizing. Grounded in the belief that online community is an active and productive discourse, which brings forth unique subjectivities of community members, this cyberethnographic study analyzes interactions in one online college class. Focusing on the performative nature of student subjectivities, embodying the online community itself yet reflecting the individual literacy of each community member, I argue that considering subjective performances of online community is vital for understanding its goals, practices and principles and limitations; and, is critical for the assessment of its success.

PROBLEMATIZING ONLINE COMMUNITY

An underlying foundation of much of research on online communities is the widely accepted idea of the communality of the cyberspace and its conduciveness to the formation of social binding that was quickly labeled as one of key futures of “online community.” The social binding produced while interacting online remained a recurrent theme of much of research on online education throughout the 1990s. Rheingold (1994), a keen explorer of online communities, stresses *shared interests* of online communicators as the building blocks of community. Such shared interests, according to Rheingold, trigger social binding and lead to the formation of a communal space. Rheingold’s belief in the automatism of the establishment of

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