

PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A Social Learning Perspective

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Abstract: A promise of new web-based technologies is that they provide learning opportunities for people distributed across the globe but who can participate across time and space in the same virtual learning community. How do they do it? In this paper we report on some of the experiences of a virtual learning community which has members from twenty-five countries across different time-zones and who communicate in English. Through a communities of practice perspective we focus on the social nature of learning and describe some of the challenges and design issues raised in this community as it explores and develops practices for learning in an international online environment. While our focus is on social practices, and on developing an identity of participation in relation to those practices, we also make some wishes for web-based technologies that would better support these practices in an international virtual learning community.

1 INTRODUCTION

Web-based technologies and increased access to the Internet promise learning solutions for anyone, at any time and in any place. As Paloff and Pratt, leading writers in the field of online learning communities, claim: "(t)he beauty of technology now is that software allows for the translation of material and allows all voices to be heard regardless of what one's native language might be." (2002: online seminar) They go on to attribute increased access to international learning communities as the result of advances in the use of technology: "Thanks to the software we're all using here, we're able to be a part of your (Brazilian) community and you a part of ours."

These are promising words in a challenging scenario for education, juggling competition for students, internationalization and e-learning. It represents a cozy view for training organizations compet-

ing for a share of the growing international learning market as they increasingly turn to the idea of starting online communities of practice to share knowledge across cultures and borders.

However, our concern is that international online communities may be more problematic than Paloff and Pratt claim. What is referred to as an "international" learning community often refers to a course offered in English (Mason, 1998), possibly with translation of the materials and sold with some linguistic concessions to students or participants for whom English is not a first language. At the same time learning paradigms are moving away from the transmission of (easily translatable) content towards social constructivist views of negotiation of meaning and co-construction of content. If we are to take such a paradigm seriously, then how do we design for negotiating meaning with people who speak dif-

ferent first languages and who come from diverse social and cultural contexts?

Our principle aim in this paper is to report from a virtual learning community that has members from various work settings, professions and countries around the world with a view to sharing some of its practices. The authors are active members of this virtual learning community and have individually and collaboratively designed and presented a significant number of international courses and online workshops during the previous six years. For each of the practices we describe we also propose a wish for a web-based technology that could help support that practice.

Underlying our review and description of interaction practices are the words of Barab, Kling and Gray who emphasize that "*Building online communities in the service of learning is a major accomplishment about which we have much to learn*" (2004:4, italics in the original). We would add that paying attention to cross-national and cross-cultural dimensions in international online communities adds to the complexity, challenges and value in such an accomplishment.

2 A THEORETICAL LENS

Our social learning perspective has its roots in Bandura's social learning theory (1977) which emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviours of others. It draws on the notion of situated learning (Lave, 1988) where learning is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs and where people move from the periphery of a community to the centre as they become more active and engaged in the practices of a community through a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In a communities of practice theory of learning the principle focus is that of social participation (Wenger, 1998:4) where participation means "being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities." (ibid. italics in the original). Participation, according to Wenger, is the process of taking part in a community of practice as well as the relations with others that reflect that process (ibid.:55). Participation includes but is not limited to collaboration; it involves all kinds of relations, cooperative and competitive, conflictual and harmonious, intimate and political (ibid.:56). Participation in this sense is not something that refers to specific activities with specific people; it is a constituent part of a person's identity. It is an accountability to a community and the meanings that are given through their

participation in it (ibid.:57). Wenger refers to this identity that is constituted through participation as an *identity of participation*.

In this case our concern is with identities that arise from participation in the social practices of a community that spans different geographical locations and different first languages rather than with identities or practices that arise from particular national characteristics or traits. Therefore we have avoided traditional frameworks of viewing communication between people from different national cultures in terms of concepts such as high/low context cultures developed by Hall (1976) or cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1980). Rather, our premise has been that culture is in an ongoing process of negotiation of meaning and the development of an identity of participation in a third space, with the notion of a "third space" coming from writers of cultural and post-colonial studies such as Useem, Useem and Donoghue (1963) and Bhabha (1994).

Our primary focus with the *virtual* in a virtual learning community is to view it as a location for an ongoing transformation of practice and identity of participation in a process of doing things together; our secondary focus is on the technology that enables the virtual to happen. Our concern with the "*learning*" in e-learning is that in an environment that is mainly electronic, the social processes still need to enable learning or negotiation of meaning to happen.

In terms of terminology we have been casual in our use of the terms "online" and "virtual" learning communities as we use them interchangeably. Furthermore, "online" community implies that conversations only take place through an electronic environment, while some community conversations take place in telephone conferences and occasionally when some members manage to meet face-to-face. And finally, we have used "international" to refer to people participating across different linguistic and national boundaries in English, glossing over the overlaps and helpful use of the term "distributed" communities.

3 CONTEXT

Our main focus is on a virtual learning community, CPsquare¹, whose domain or topic is that of communities of practice. Conversations take place in Web Crossing², a community based discussion tool with a number of plug-ins developed over the years by some of its members. People come from more

¹ <http://www.cpsquare.org>

² <http://www.webcrossing.com/Home/>

than 25 different countries and 15 different time-zones around the world and use English as the main language. In this community learning is not seen as transmission of content, and the question of translating materials is not an issue. Rather, its principle learning focus is that of sharing and supporting each others' professional practices in a process of dialogue, trust-building and mutual support. The professional practice of most members includes working in or with communities of practice in different contexts in different parts of the world.

Three years ago questions arose in the community about improving points of contact and communication in CPsquare between people living in different time-zones, from different national and cultural contexts and often with different first languages. In particular the writing of some international guidelines took place in 2003 as a response to some people feeling excluded from CPsquare events because of their geographical location, far from the United States. Meanwhile, some people were also asking the question: while CPsquare talks about international participation, how does, or how should, that translate to practice? A discussion took place with the aim of producing some "emerging logistical, cultural and linguistic guidelines for facilitating, participating and collaborating in an online distributed community that includes people from different countries". The results of these discussions were published on the public community blog.³

In 2005 we decided to review the document written in 2003 to find out to what extent the guidelines were being used or had been helpful to people working in international communities. We collected data from three main sources. First we sent a short web based survey to all community members about the importance of these issues and the usefulness of the international guidelines to them in their communities. We also narrowed down the 60 original principles of the 2003 guidelines into seven key recommendations and invited members to contribute in the online discussion space with examples and stories of where these recommendations had been helpful (or not) in their practice. During this time we organized and recorded two telephone conferences to complement these discussions,

In response to a question about the importance of "issues such as different nationalities, languages, time zones, technology standards, etc." in the communities they worked with most closely, 95% of the thirty-nine responses to the web-based survey said that these issues were between "somewhat" and "very important." As one community member said

in response to an open-ended question "[They] matter in some [communities] quite a bit, in others barely at all. It is totally context dependent." However, we discovered in the survey that few people had actually read the guidelines or were even aware of their existence. This comment by one member reflects those of a number of others: "I have only just read the CP2 guidelines and I think this document is an excellent starting point for a community. It lets them know of issues to consider."

Interestingly, the discussions that came about in preparation for this paper stimulated more people to read the guidelines. A related finding was that over three quarters of the survey respondents considered that other community members, not the guidelines themselves, were the most helpful resources for improving their practices for supporting communities spanning different countries, cultures or languages. Such a finding reinforces the notion that role modeling of good practice is at least as important as providing guidelines.

Two of the authors of this paper were involved in producing the original guidelines. All three authors have similar and different types of experience of participating in international communities. One author lives and works in Portuguese speaking communities while her first language is English. The second author lives in the United States, coming from a family that is bilingual in Spanish and English. And the third author lives and works in Switzerland, his first languages being Italian and German. At many levels our practices and identity have shaped and are shaped by our immersion in different communities in different languages and in different social and cultural contexts.

4 EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE

In our review of the International Guidelines written in 2003 we discussed that what may appear to be "little things" in the design, organization and facilitation of international virtual communities often represent practices that can have a high influence on someone's participation in a community. However, it is frequently these "little things" that are overlooked in the quest for creating communities around attractive content and the latest technology. What is more, with fewer visual cues and a slower response for repairing misunderstandings, the little things can become magnified to the extent that they can seriously affect a person's participation and the meaning they get from the community. We have selected seven of these "little things" from the original guidelines, highlighting some of the social practices that

³ Internationalisation: guidelines and considerations, <http://www.cpsquare.org/News/archives/000021.html>

give meaning to participation in the community's learning processes. In summary they are:

1. Time for participation;
2. Use of user-friendly language;
3. A standard time unit for synchronous meetings;
4. Graceful ways of bringing people into conversations;
5. Articulation and reflection of cultural and learning expectations;
6. An "ecology of communication" modes and skills;
7. Modeling of good practice.

We discuss each of these practices, identifying some of the reasons why they have been important in CPsquare or in related workshops and learning environments designed or facilitated by CPsquare members. For each practice we make a wish for a web-based feature or tool that could be used to support it. Neither the practices nor the wishes are intended to be "solutions", they are reflections on practice. Moreover each practice and wish potentially brings a further challenge. Most of the wishes are already feasible as principles and features of new web-based technologies. However, they are not integrated in the Web Crossing platform. In common with many other virtual learning communities it would not be feasible or even desirable to be changing platforms to keep up with these new technologies. Rather, our wishes come in the context of being able to combine and integrate some of these new features into an existing system.

4.1 Time for Participation

Common to most people's experience in CPsquare is that participation in international communities requires taking more time: time for "talking", "listening" and negotiating meaning, and time for reflecting. Without taking the time to establish, maintain and reflect on the social practices of people whose first languages are different, and who come from different contexts, opportunities for negotiating meaning, and therefore learning, are lost.

However, Trayner's main finding in an inquiry into multilingual participation in an online workshop was that "Time, or lack of time, was a thread running through almost all reflections ... from both participants and ... organisers" (2003:417). It was also the main finding in a report on another international online workshop co-presented by White, Smith and Trayner, who wrote: "The overriding lesson for the workshop designers and facilitators was the excessive number of hours that it took to facilitate the workshop" (2004:17). They added that

"(b)oth the multilingual nature of the workshop, the shifting elements of the group and the topic, and the expectations from sponsors and participants about the role of the facilitators led to an unsustainable work level" (ibid.).

A problem that arises in designing and allowing for more time to participate in social processes is that it often creates a tension in relation to host institutions, sponsors and participants who measure value in terms of amount of content covered rather than depth of learning and the negotiation of meaning. A further problem is that the time required of facilitators for working across languages and cultures can result in an unsustainable work level for facilitators but which is often invisible to participants and sponsors.

A technology wish for supporting "taking the time" would be a tool that helped make online interactions more visible. While web-based tools often count number of posts written, it is also helpful to know number of posts read. A personal tally that kept a record of the time an individual and groups spent in specific community spaces or activities could also be useful for managing and budgeting time, although there would be issues around transparency and who had access to this information. This would be particularly so if the information was to be used for assessment, evaluation or remuneration purposes. A more ambitious wish would be a way of measuring or making visible the practices involved in shaping and transforming an identity of participation in order that it could be recognized and valued by sponsors and participants.

4.2 Use of User-Friendly Language

It is common to hear people whose first language is English, say "We don't have a problem, we all just speak English." However, where many members are not using their first language, or indeed are using their third or fourth language, the choice of language, colloquialisms, abbreviations, jargon and culturally specific references can discourage participation. For example, to the American presenter welcoming people into a discussion of his work "a baby shower" seemed like an obvious reference to the discussion topic's parentage but it was mystifying to others. In another case, people doing doctoral research in Europe and Australia were puzzled and did not feel described by the label "grad students" in the call to a conversation by US participants. Specifically in terms of language, someone's use of "Let's move on" could have been easier to understand for people who spoke languages of Latin origin if the phrase had been "Let's continue".

In the international guidelines of 2003 we emphasized ways in which the English language can be “Latinized,” making it more accessible to speakers of languages of Latin origin (p.10). However, it was pointed out that fine-tuning your sensitivities to the use of language and cultural references could be more helpful than a blanket rule of “Latinizing”. It also looks as though those people in the community who have online friends with whom they can check their understanding or interpretations are more likely to continue participating in the face of potential misunderstandings than those who do not. This means that ensuring that the social processes and technological means are in place for checking meaning with fellow-participants could be as important as the choice and use of language.

In fact the tension between knowing and not-knowing what words mean is an opportunity to explore the shades of meaning and for the community to create new meanings and to develop and identities practices around those meanings. In an online event in this community three years ago someone referred to a Scottish slang word “Glasweg”. When asked to clarify the meaning he said it was “a Glaswegian usage” meaning that it was part of the dialect of Glasgow. A German participant understood his explanation to refer to a type of usage by a leading writer named “Glasgow”, as if it were a Bandur-ian or Wenger-ian or Glasweg-ian usage. This misunderstanding led to the light-hearted creation of a fictitious character “Ian Glasweg” who, to this day, is a shared reference and mark of identity for some community members who participated in that event.

The ways in which new meanings are given to language and the jargon and colloquialisms that develop as a community matures can then appear incomprehensible to newcomers. This means that developing user-friendly language and managing the tensions and inventiveness of negotiating meanings in the third space is an ongoing enterprise that is not only limited to first and second speakers of English.

A technology wish for facilitating language would be an easy way for people to be able to create link titles over words, sentences or chunks of text. That way the author of a post could create a link title which showed up when a reader had their pointer hovering over the selected text giving synonyms, explanations or context. Similarly, software could automatically create links to explanatory entries to a resource like Wikipedia. However, such a wish would need to be modeled as a complementary language tool rather than as a substitute for playing with and creating new meanings.

4.3 A Standard Time Unit for Synchronous Meetings

Organizing collaboration in a group of people across many time zones and with widely-varying levels of experience can make an apparently simple thing like deciding when to meet, synchronously, a significant challenge. An example of a problem in CPsquare was that convenient meeting times for the majority of people in the group meant that a minority of members had to participate at five o’clock in the morning. Another problem was a difficulty expressing one’s own local time in relation to others’ so that people could effectively agree on a time to meet on a chat, phone conference or one-to-one telephone call. Merely arranging to meet at time in relation to “PST” or even “GMT” did not seem to be sufficient for people who do not know those abbreviations, nor did it help with the complex calculations necessary for working out the different local times of many people in different time-zones. Additional factors such as “daylight savings” and local holidays have turned a seemingly simple act of setting a meeting time into quite a complex one.

Using both a standard time reference such as GMT, and a time calculation tool such as The World Clock Meeting Planner⁴ has proved to be one way of avoiding confusion. However, the issue of including more people at the cost of holding synchronous events at inconvenient times is one that a tool cannot help to solve: it still requires flexibility and social consideration. A technology wish would be a world clock meeting planner that is instantly customized with the name, location, time and public holidays of all community members when they join a community or register for an event. It would also be helpful to have easy access to member spaces which could contain RSS⁵ calendar feeds, allowing members of a community to selectively share their calendars with each other.

4.4 Graceful Ways of Bringing People Into Conversations

Learning conversations develop their own momentum once people engage with a subject and with each other. However, many people need to overcome technical and social barriers to feel comfortable enough to fully engage in such a conversation. Most online courses or workshops provide instructions and manuals to help bring people into the

⁴ <http://www.timeanddate.com/>

⁵ Real Simple Syndication

online environment. However, even when they are read, manuals and instructions about how to operate the technology or how to interact in the platform are often misinterpreted. Comprehensive manuals and instructions can also be so detailed that they are overwhelming, especially if they are in someone's second language. What is more, strictly followed instruction manuals can discourage learning strategies such as exploration and invention.

More helpful than detailed instructions have been designs for incorporating social interaction and practice with technologies that help people into the conversation one-step-at-a-time. For example in an online facilitation workshop⁶ for Portuguese participants we used a game at the beginning called "Just Three Words" where no posting could be more than three words and each posting followed on from the next. This simple game provided an opportunity for people to become familiar with the technology while also socializing in an informal and non-threatening way. A second example of graceful ways of including people was through the use of personal journals. People who were not confident of posting in the main forum (for language reasons, for example) could post their reflections and thoughts in personal journals. Those journals became places for reflecting aloud and developing a voice alongside or as an alternative to the conversations taking place in the main arena. The journals provided a bridge and a sheltered passage to the main forum. Finally a third example in the same workshop was that of bringing in new people to a community as guests. Building on the social bonds and group accomplishments that had accumulated over a 6-week period more senior practitioners were invited in as guest critics of a joint product that had been drafted by small groups during the workshop. Having a guest enter a space where a small group of participants played the role of hosts meant that people who had begun the process by feeling like "newcomers" now became "old hands" in the welcoming of new expertise into the community.

However, if it is difficult for a participant to navigate to the location where these activities are taking place, then the process is not such a graceful one. A technology wish would be a pop-up window or a personalized desktop where someone could find links to and navigate between those locations as soon as they entered the platform. A further wish would be an integrated desktop that included web conferencing, email, instant messaging, telephone conferencing and other media that allowed a partici-

pant or facilitator to easily select a technology for reaching out to people on the periphery of a conversation.

4.5 Articulation and Reflection of Cultural and Learning Expectations

Many people have stories of misinterpreted communication online when members were not familiar with someone else's expectations of collaboration or learning. These misinterpretations have been easily exaggerated in the absence of cues and feedback from the other person or fellow members.

Having a space within the online learning environment for members to keep personal learning journals has been a way of providing clues about people's changing perspectives of what is happening and about potential areas of miscommunication. For example in one workshop a participant wrote observations about the informal relationships between facilitator and participants compared to her own experiences in a Portuguese course. Another wrote her frustrations and anxieties about what looked like a "big confusion" rather than structured learning activities and uncertainty about what was expected of him. Some people followed a conversation in English but were able to reflect on the conversations in Portuguese. These examples provided opportunities for fellow members and facilitators to understand and use the reflections as a springboard for learning rather than an invisible reason for dropping out of the learning event. It has also been important to encourage people to articulate and reflect on their assumptions about each other. Importantly, a welcoming, encouraging style of communication from a facilitator who is curious and values discussing these issues is one that models openness and an attitude of "not knowing" in a way that helps surface people's assumptions about learning and expectations rather than taking one set of assumptions for granted.

However, despite good intentions of designing for this ongoing articulation and reflection of expectations, if other practices are not in place, then this is one that easily becomes side-tracked. For example, if a lot of time is spent becoming familiar with the technology or completing structured tasks, or if the language and cultural references make someone feel excluded, people rarely articulate and reflect aloud regardless of the facilitator's style or whether they have a personal learning journal.

A technology wish would be to have spaces for personal journals that are both easily accessible but which are sufficiently discrete so as not to overwhelm the online space. They would not be too

⁶ Facilitação de projectos de aprendizagem em comunidades de prática: http://www.learningalliances.net/CoPs_em_Portugal_2004/index_em_Portuguese.htm

complicated to set up, use, or administer (for example, in terms of controlling access). The journals would be private, open or shared with spaces for photographs, audio recordings or podcasts. It would also be helpful to be able to use RSS feeds in a journal so that it recorded entries from a blog kept outside the community space in a personal journal inside the community space.

4.6 An “Ecology of Communication⁷” Modes and Skills

While conversations in CPsquare began as asynchronous discussions with occasional telephone conferences, over the years the use of different modes for communicating and coming together has changed in number and complexity. For example, a member is invited to talk about a particular project she is working on and she begins with an online discussion that includes a paper or a set of slides and maybe some photographs. After two weeks of online discussion, a telephone conference is held with some members who continue or develop the discussion for an hour on the telephone. This telephone conversation is recorded and the audio file put in the online discussion space. Also, during the telephone conversation some members enter the Web Crossing chat room and take notes during the call. These notes are also posted to the online discussion space. Making sense of the discussion about a member’s project through different modes is helpful in this cross-national and cross-linguistic setting for a number of reasons. It provides a range of modes for people to participate and facilitates access to people who have different types of linguistic competencies. Audio recordings and notes from telephone conversations are available for people to refer to and discuss even if they could not participate, for example because of a schedule conflict. Audio recordings also mean that conversations can be re-listened to if following or participating in the conversation was difficult the first time.

However, not only do different people have different access to different modes, but becoming competent in several or many modes can also be overwhelming. Telephone systems in different countries have different cost structures and different capabilities making it an easy option for some and an expensive one for others. Integrating synchronous conversations into a mainly asynchronous community conversation highlights the differences between coun-

tries even if it can bring members closer together. Moreover, adding different modes to the communication ecology is not an end in itself; this ecology includes layers of skills, practices and attitudes in the ongoing shaping and modeling of social practices.

A technology wish here is to make all of the resources of a community equally available and easy to integrate with each other. Currently, integrating several resources together requires considerable expertise on the part of facilitators and community leaders whereas it would be more helpful if these resources could be used selectively so that a facilitator did not feel that they had to use all the tools all the time and members would feel that they had a choice of tools for different events.

4.7 Modeling of Good Practice

Modeling good practice is integral to all the six practices we have discussed. Most people agreed that any set of guidelines and instructions were only as effective as the way in which they were put into practice by facilitators, leaders and co-members. They also reported that modeling an attitude of inquiry and reflection, or the use of user-friendly language, or graceful ways of bringing people into the conversation have been the basis of improved practice and learning in their communities. Hearing stories of success and how people overcame challenges in online communities that cross cultural or national boundaries is a key factor for learning and improving practice.

A technology wish that could help in noticing and reflecting on modeling would be to have ways to record and label representations of practice, such as an easy to use bookmark or “clippings” folder for recording, managing and referring to examples of practice. This would also include the possibility of making reflective notes about these clippings or bookmarks. There would be different ways to link, categorize and represent them to other members. The wish would also be for tools or standards that make it possible to share or compare clipping and bookmarks across platforms and systems, integrating disparate tools such as online discussions and telephone conferences.

5 SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

We began this paper by suggesting that participating in international virtual learning communities is more challenging than is sometimes acknowledged. This is particularly so when the philosophy for improved learning is that of developing recursive social prac-

⁷ An expression coined by CPsquare member, Dr. Steve Eskow

tices for the negotiation of meaning-making or of developing an identity of participation, rather than merely developing better methods and technology functions for transmitting or sharing information. We highlighted seven social practices in a specific virtual learning community with a view to sharing a description, wish list and discussion of the ambiguities and complexities that each one currently and potentially presents in that community.

In the future we would like to reformulate both the content and the mode of presenting the guidelines in the community. The data and stories we collected about member's perspectives and experiences of international communication still need to be analyzed, reflected and written about in more detail in our cycle of action research. Further research also needs to be carried out into the identity of participation, not only in the context of one community but on how an identity of participation is negotiated in the context of membership in multiple communities that straddle different countries, time-zones and languages. Such research could possibly lead to a communities of practice framework for analyzing cultural, or third space, dimensions of online communication.

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