

Foreword: Designing virtual communities in the service of learning

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These are early days in the exploration of how *the concept of community*—challenging enough in its own right for inquiries in social science, politics, and education—is to be understood in the emerging hybrid worlds in which people live. These worlds are not simply governed through face-to-face communication. Conversations and relationships are, for a growing number of people, mediated through new tools enabled by computing and telecommunications. These are exciting times, akin to the first decades of the written word and the discourse that might have ensued around what it meant to have the new “virtual talk” that texts created. An examination of Socrates dialogues in Plato’s *Phaedrus* may provide some insight into what such discourse might have been like as Socrates questions the wisdom of writing and books. In these dialogues, Socrates outlines the myth of how the ancient god Theuth gave writing to Thamus, the king of Egypt, and while Theuth advocates that his discovery of writing “provides a recipe for memory and wisdom” that ought to be imparted to other Egyptians, Thamus challenges the gift: “If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-275b, trans. Hackforth)

The editors have assembled a number of the most active researchers in the field of “virtual communities” for learning, and to varying degrees the authors take on the voice of Theuth, Thamus, or the dialectic between them as they challenge us to consider what the designs and implementations of virtual learning communities are accomplishing, and how we might learn to more successfully contribute to learning with our design features and processes for online communities. To this end, many of the authors ask: What is a community? What makes a community? And once we move online in our activities: What is a virtual community? What does it mean to “design” a community, whether real or virtual? What is special about designing virtual communities in the service of learning, rather than for other purposes? How do virtual learning communities relate to place-based “communities of learning”? And how can systematic methods of investigation of online community participation contribute not only to scientific understanding of human behaviors in such systems, but to new design cycles that improve the fit between community member needs and system properties?

Many but not all of the chapters investigate issues affiliated with K-12 education related communities of learning that are conducted to a significant degree online. We learn about: several different environments developed to support online community engagement among pre-service and in-service mathematics and science teachers; a campus of virtual places used by teaching professionals throughout the K-12 continuum and those who support their learning; a community forum for mathematics educators at

all levels; and several on-line communities established to foster learning for school children. In the realm beyond K-12, there are also accounts of several scholarly learning networks, in technology and in linguistics, and of workplace communities. There are rich profiles of developing methods for studying virtual learning communities, including social network analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis. Throughout the book, we learn about the struggles, dilemmas, cautions, and dualities that surface in designing for virtual communities. While often optimistic in tone, these works do not promote online community as a panacea for learning, and deepen our appreciation for the subtle and intricate nature of motives, trust, and identity display in social engagements.

I would caution the reader not to be too swept up in a quest to find “the right” definition for learning community, virtual community, or community more generally. I am fond of telling my students that definitions, like maps, are developed for a purpose, and that they become useful to the extent that they enable wayfinding for those who are using them. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein pushed us far in thinking about definitions when he argued that the meaning of the concept “game” is not one governed so simply as by an Aristotelian definition of necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership. He makes the case that concepts are organized in mental and social life by prototypic exemplars, a view re-discovered and developed in cognitive science during the 1970’s as Eleanor Rosch and colleagues at Berkeley demonstrated prototype effects in experimental studies of categorization, including “typicality,” a finding that people reliably judge certain exemplars as more representative of a concept than others.

My sense from reading the contributions to this volume is that there is an emerging vision here of prototypic exemplars of virtual communities designed in the service of learning. This book chronicles an initial cartography for the terrain in which investigations of virtual learning community are taking place, and launches a wayfinding process for those seeking to identify the key issues for learning in online communities as they exist or are being designed. The fascinating exercise for the reader will be to find their own way through the territory the authors have begun to map, and to bring their own discoveries back to the quest for understanding and exploring the future of learning served by virtual community tools and systems. And finally, I wish to acknowledge my grief and sadness at the loss of such a valuable colleague and friend as co-editor Rob Kling, whose clarion voice representing the importance of constant consideration of values of social justice, fairness, and community in the face of technology-centered design has inspired so many of us.

- Stanford University, 16 June 2003