



Learning through social interactions (Online communities)

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In this paper we will explore the “community” aspect of learning more deeply, and figure how we can create and sustain a culture of learning using online communities.

One aspect that characterizes communities is the nature of the social interactions between members of the community. People form communities to pursue shared goals or ideals. In the act of pursuing these goals and ideals, they form relationships. It is the nature of the social interactions through these relationships that sustains the community, or in the case of a community of learners, sustains learning.

Despite the tendency to shut ourselves away and sit in Rodinesque isolation when we have to learn, learning is a remarkably social process. Social groups provide the resources for their members to learn (Brown, Duguid, 2000, p.137).

Thus, if we were to create successful e-learning environments, it would seem that we would have to include means and mechanisms through which we can foster online social interactions that can enable learners to form strong relationships. These means and mechanisms have already been in existence for a long time. Online communication tools such as newsgroups, discussion boards, chat and messaging programs, etc. are used by many online learning courses. The issue here is not just the *inclusion* of the tools, but the manner in which they are used to create and sustain relationships.

In a recent article in *First Monday*, a peer review journal on the Internet, revealed the failure of using newsgroups in four online courses:

In a series of four studies, student postings on newsgroups created for their courses at Carleton University were monitored, and opinions were gathered from samples of students and instructors regarding their newsgroup activities. Results show that an overwhelming majority of students never posted messages on newsgroups, nor did their instructors. In addition, a large majority of students rarely read what others had posted... . The results clearly indicate that course newsgroups have limited educational value until students and instructors find more time and motivation to make more and better use of the medium (Bagherian & Thorngate, 2000).

So, why are attempts at building online learning communities failing? Or, what is it that makes online communication successful? There seem to be many more issues than the mere inclusions of communication tools, and one way to find out what these issues are is to study successful online communities.

Building online communities The Well way

Online communities have been a feature of the Internet since its inception— in fact they preceded the Web. These communities have enabled people of similar interests to form groups and connect with one another regardless of geography and time constraints.

Newsgroups (an early form of online community) were the primary driver for the growth of the Internet during the 1993/94 period. Since then various other means of forming communities have emerged. Now, there are mailing lists, message boards, chats, and virtual worlds (Kim, 2000) that cater to fostering online communities. But with the proliferation of such new tools, and subsequently of websites catering to online communities, there has been growing confusion on what actually constitutes an online community.

"Community" is quite possibly the most over-used word in the Net industry. True community -- the ability to connect with people who have similar interests -- may well be the key to the digital world, but the term has been diluted and debased to describe even the most tenuous connections, the most minimal interactivity (Brown, 1999).

Because the Internet afforded the formation of communities, and because of easy availability of tools to build such communities, some business and organizations took the build-it-and-they-will-come approach, i.e., they took the participation factor for granted. This did not lead to any of the perceived advantages of having communities-- richer insights, knowledge sharing, loyalty, problem-solving, support, etc.-- rather it led to emptiness and dissent. These days many of the portal sites like Yahoo!, Excite, Delphi, etc. are offering "instant communities", communities anyone can build with a few mouse clicks. But taking advantage of this service does not entail that there would be participation or, that the community would be successful:

Most of these services, to be sure, have bulletin boards, chat rooms, scheduled events, thematic interest areas -- and of course millions of "members." But the vast majority of the people who come and build their homes are not doing much interacting with the others in their community (Brown, 1999).

Thus, even with having the tools to build online communities, there seems to be a huge chasm between just creating online communities and creating and sustaining *successful* online communities.

When the talk is about successful online communities, one online community that instantly props up in many minds is *The Well*. There has been no other more highly admired and respected online community than The Well (www.well.com).

"The world's most influential online community". This is how *Wired Magazine* (*Wired*, May 1997) referred to The Well in a cover issue three years ago. Open to the public on April 1st, 1985, The Well started off as a social experiment by its founders. Their idea was to "take a group of interesting people, give them the means to stay in continuous communication with one another, stand back and see what happens" (Hafner, 1997, p.101). And what happened was the creation of that which has been "admired and studied far and wide as a model for the future sophisticated networked systems".

History has already decreed The Well to be synonymous with online communication in its best, worst, and, above all, most vital forms. Though always small in overall numbers, its influence and recognition far outweighed any significance that could be measured by membership or revenues. The Well created a paradox: scruffy, undercapitalized, and armed with a huge amount of clout. It would become a harbinger of both the excitement and the concerns that would arise on the Net over the uses of electronic networks and virtual dialogs, free speech, privacy, and anonymity (p.100).

The Well, which stands for The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, began with the sole purpose of fostering intellectual and stimulating conversations. The French literary salon model was chosen as the intellectual model of The Well. This model would spurn several "conferences"; each devoted to a subject around which lively conversations could nurture. As Matthew McClure, The Well's first director put it, "the kind of ecology that we wanted to build on The Well was intelligent people with diverse interests who were sufficiently outgoing and extroverted that they would be naturals in the medium" (p.106).

Each conference on The Well could spawn a number of "topics" devoted to more specific discussions. In this way, those who felt that the conversations were getting too general or too loose were given the opportunity to create new topics to refocus on interesting issues. Thus, in one way, The Well was designed to evolve. If one wanted to start a totally new conference, one had to submit the ideas to The Well's director for acceptance.

There were all types of conferences happening on The Well. There were conferences dedicated to the Future, Automobiles, Telecommunications, Parenthood, Politics, Arts, Education, Science Fiction, Sports, Comics etc. At times, the quality of the conferences on The Well was such that it always attracted media attention:

The Well had become a force whose influence was wildly disproportionate to its size. A discussion that started on The Well had a way of bleeding into the larger world; it would be taken up and then written and talked about in more mainstream forums. As a result, many ideas generated on The Well became pivotal in the history of cyberspace, including the naming of cyberspace itself– it was in a Well posting that John Perry Barlow first took science fiction writer William Gibson's term and applied it to the present (p.124).

What made The Well so successful? Why is The Well the envy of all the so-called community sites these days? What is the magic that The Well had that is so difficult to replicate? In order to answer these questions, we need to build a simple framework to analyze The Well (see fig. 6.1). Using this framework, we can aim to analyze the processes that led to The Well's success.

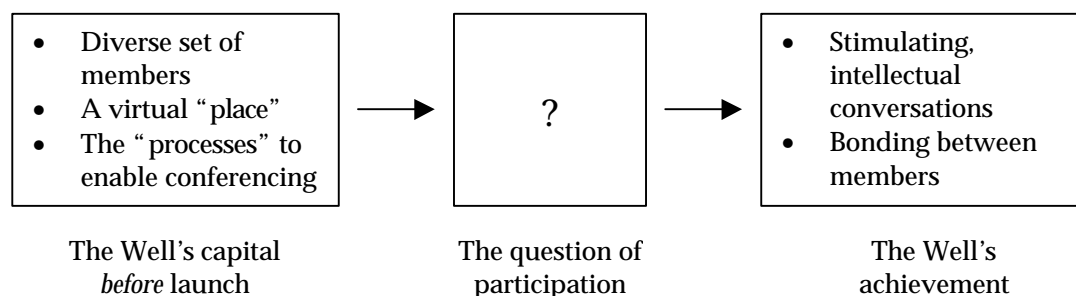


Figure 6.1
A simple framework for analyzing The Well

The Well's capital before launch were its members and the tools to enable conferencing. The Well's original intended target audience was be the intellectual types living in the San Francisco Bay area. These were the baby boomers in their late 30s and 40s, mostly male, and many with postgraduate degrees and most had a flair to communicate through the written form (Hafner, 1997; Rheingold, 1994). Although, The Well might have been a social experiment to figure what happens when interesting people are given the ability to stay in continuous communication, there are several factors that were responsible for the resulting stimulating, intellectual conversations and bonding between the members that occurred. So, what were these factors that spurred participation? We shall consider the important three:

1. Purpose and reason
2. Leadership roles
3. Face-to-face meetings

Purpose and reason

Although it may seem that that the main attracting power of The Well during the late 80s may have been due to the novelty of the idea of conferencing, there were some other important reasons and purposes. For example, the Deadheads conference (dedicated to the rock group Grateful Dead) attracted a lot of participation. Why? Because The Well offered the fanatic followers of the band to discuss lyrics, talk about recent concerts, plan for future concerts, introduce newcomers, etc. These activities would not have been possible without The Well. Similarly, in the Parenting conference,

members participated because they shared similar incidences, exchanged homemade remedies, obtained second opinions, etc. Again, most of these activities would have been difficult without the communication capabilities of The Well. Thus, the people who flocked to The Well found a means through which they could satisfy their needs. But The Well offered more than just a means to satisfy a need, and as we shall see, it also offered means to build relationships.

Leadership roles

There are two types of leadership roles in question here; the roles played by the people running The Well; and the roles played by the people in charge of their conferences– the “hosts”. Although The Well started off as an experiment, it was built to evolve. The people running The Well were people who had prior experience in running communes. Thus, they knew what it takes to build and nurture relationships, to solve conflicts, and cater to growth. It would be their knowledge that would be a critical factor in The Well’s success. In addition to being active contributors in many conferences, these leaders would resolve conflicts, organize events and meetings, greet newcomers, and encourage new perspectives.

The conference hosts had roughly the same set of roles, but were more intimately connected with members in their conference.

Hosts are the people who serve the same role in the WELL that a good host is supposed to serve at a party or salon--to welcome newcomers, introduce people to one another, clean up after the guests, provoke discussion, and break up fights if necessary (Rheingold, 1994, p.39)

Thus, it was this whole thought of having able, interested and encouraging peers that made the relationship between members stronger and richer. Another facet that was as important in forging strong relationships was the regular face-to-face interactions.

Face-to-face meetings

Although The Well was an online community, the bonding and the camaraderie that The Well managed to create could not have been possible without the physical interactions that transpired during the monthly *Well Parties*, as they were called.

The Well defied current notions about virtual community in that it wasn't one - entirely. In fact, the community probably wouldn't have thrived solely in virtual space. Problems that arose online got worked out offline, and vice versa (Hafner, p.111).

Having face-to-face meetings became a regular feature for the members of The Well. For example, members of the Parenting conference, used to get together regularly for picnics potlucks, birthday parties, etc. (Rheingold, 1994). It was through the interactions at such parties that members formed lasting bonds with each other. After the success of some these meetings, Well Parties became a regular feature and started to be held on a monthly basis.

So, we see that The Well did not succeed just because it enabled people to communicate with one another. The motivation to participate was groomed and nurtured by a shared need to build and sustain relationships. It was the people behind The Well that made it successful and not the technology or tools that enabled communication.

These days, with the rapid pace of technological advances, more tools are available at are disposal that can be used to create contexts for participation. We now have online events, chats, webcasts, games, promotions, auctions, etc., offering themselves as contexts around which shared understandings and participation can evolve. But as the story of The Well shows, having mere tools does not create

sustaining relationships. It is the people-based process (the desires, the humane leadership, the face-to-face meetings, etc.) behind these tools that are important for creating successful online communities.

In a similar vein, if we are to create online learning communities through which learners can build and sustain relationships and form identities in the process, we would have to consider the social elements that can create and foster active participation.

Takeaways for e-learning solutions: Building successful online learning communities

In order to bring to light the factors that are involved in creating and sustaining successful online learning communities, we can use the same framework we used to analyze The Well. But first, let us give a name to our online learning community. Let us call it “LeaRel”, symbolic for “Learning Relationships”.

In order to be a thriving online learning community, what should LeaRel aim to achieve? In an article about forming learning communities in classrooms, Allan Collins, Research Professor of Education at Boston College and Professor of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, and Katerine Bielaczyc, formerly a Senior Scientist at Bolt, Beranek and Newman, expressed some of the goals of a learning community:

In a learning community approach the goal is to foster a culture of learning, where both individuals and the community as a whole are learning how to learn. Further, members of the community share their individual efforts towards a deeper understanding of the subject matter under study. Students learn to synthesize multiple perspectives, to solve problems in a variety of ways, and to use each other’s diverse knowledge and skills as resources to collaboratively solve problems and advance their understanding (Collins & Bielaczyc, 1994, in Press)

Thus, if the above factors were to be the goals or achievements of LeaRel, what would be the process that would lead to such a goal (see fig. 6.2)?

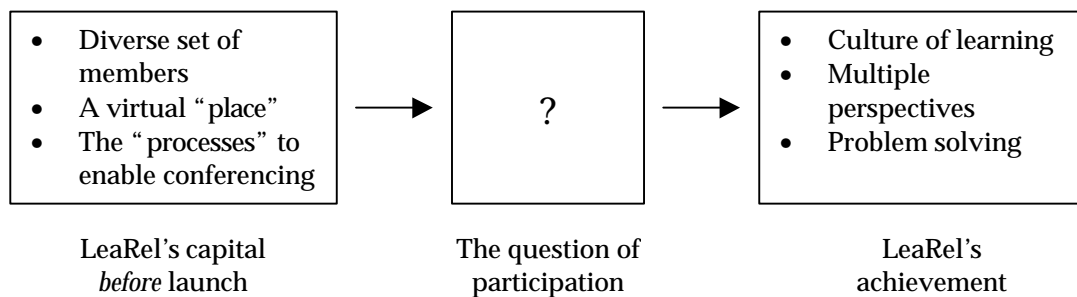


Figure 6.2
A simple framework for analyzing online learning communities

Actually, the processes that would create a successful online learning community would be similar to the process that made The Well so successful, but targeted more towards creating a culture of learning. These are:

1. Purpose and reason
2. Leadership roles
3. Face-to-face meetings

Purpose and reason

In *Mindweave: Communications, Computers, and Distance Education* (1989)– a seminal book on computer conferencing in higher education done in late 80's– Andrew Feenberg spoke about the need to build or motivate the participants of a computer conference:

Conferencing dynamics involve the management of time, both the personal time of the participants and the overall time of the conference. Sometimes these dynamics are determined by extrinsic factors, such as job deadlines or the urgent need to accomplish a mission. Conferences are surprisingly fragile, however, and no amount of external time pressure saves hopelessly mismanaged on-line groups. To a lesser extent, we see something similar in face-to-face meetings, which require not only an extrinsic *raison d'être* but also skillful leadership to insure a hearing for all those with something to say.

The social cohesion of conferences therefore depends not only upon the extrinsic motives participants bring from their off-line lives, but also the intrinsic motives that emerge in the course of the on-line interaction. To understand these intrinsic motives, we must discover how the conference empowers its members to speak up and provokes others to reply (Feenberg, 1989, p.27).

To understand the intrinsic motives that emerges during online conferences Feenberg looked into the *absorptive* capacity of sports and games:

The sociability of conferencing resembles that of sports or games where we are drawn along by interest in the next step in the action. Every comment has a double goal: to communicate something and to evoke the (passive or active) participation of interlocutors... . The concept of absorption refers to the sharing of purpose among people who do not form a community but have accepted a common work or play as the context for an intense, temporary relationship. The term nicely describes participants' feelings about an exciting conference. They are 'absorbed' in the activity as one might be in a game of poker or bridge (Feenberg, 1989, p.27).

We can apply the same analogy to e-learning communities as well. In order to attain learning goals and objectives, learning communities should strive to include absorbing learning activities around which conferences can grow. Collins and Bielaczyc further describe the nature of such learning activities:

Because the goals focus on fostering a culture of learning, the activities of learning communities must provide means for 1) both individual development and collaborative construction of knowledge, 2) sharing knowledge and skills among members of the community, and 3) making the learning process visible and articulated (Collins & Bielaczyc, 1994, in Press).

Lynn Davie, another contributor to *Mindweave*, describes one possible learning activity– Joint writing of projects:

I begin by discussing assignments, by asking students to work in a small group, presenting a group paper. Although I always include an individual requirement for grading purposes in the course, I believe the joint writing project has several advantages. In the necessary discussion and debate leading to a cooperative statement, the students must examine and analyze the material deeply. In addition, they have the advantage of other students' perceptions as they wrestle with the analysis. To facilitate this, I open a workspace (actually a branch conference) for each group, with the members of the group and myself as members. By being a member I can monitor the discussion, provide some assistance from time to time and

communicate privately with the group. It is as if each small group has the instructor as a member.

Most of the time I do not participate, but I can if it seems appropriate or if the group asks me a specific question. Of course, the group has a separate channel available so, if they wish, they can write private messages to each other (Davie, 1989, p.83).

In the same vein, if LeaRel were to be used for a Corporate Marketing course then some of the activities could include:

- A joint critique on a recent article, case study or book
- Brainstorming on possible solutions for a given problem
- Sharing personal experiences
- Debating on controversial issues

Example

The Web has opened up a new channel for marketing. Online marketing is hogging the limelight these days. But there are many issues and strategies involved in conducting an online marketing campaign prompting eminent marketing professionals to write books on them. One possible activity for LeaRel could be to discuss specific points or ideas from one such book— say from *Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers Into Friends, and Friends into Customers* (1999), by Seth Godin. Permission Marketing, according to Godin, is the act of targeting customers only after they have given the consent to do so. So, if a customer gives Delta Air his email address, he is giving his consent or permission to get to be targeted with deals and promotions. Thus possible discussion points in LeaRel could be:

- What is “permission” marketing?
- Who is using it?
- What about privacy issues?
- How does it stand with other online marketing strategies?
- Any metrics available?
- How can we make use of it?

A case study discussion could then follow, for example, on how Amazon.com using permission marketing and how it is benefiting the company? This could be followed by another case study of Amazon.com’s misuse of permission marketing strategies. Thus, the need to learn about permission marketing by taking a balanced look from different perspectives would direct the purpose and reason for using LeaRel.

Leadership roles

When it comes to the role of Instructors for an online learning community, the Instructors should act more like facilitators, or in online community parlance, like “hosts” or, “moderators”. Moderating an online community is a difficult but creative job. It requires more than just initiating discussions or conversations. Responsibilities include “keeping discussions track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony” (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995, p. 91).

Way back in 1991, Robin Mason, co-editor of *Mindweave*, laid down the moderating roles of the instructor-cum-moderator into three categories: organizational, social and intellectual:

Organization Role:

One of the first duties of an online tutor is to 'set the agenda' for the conference: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms. Managing the interactions with strong leadership and direction is considered a sine qua non of successful conferencing...

Social Role:

Creating a friendly, social environment for learning is also seen as an essential moderator skill. Sending welcoming messages at the beginning and encouraging participation throughout are specific examples, but providing lots of feedback on students' inputs, and using a friendly, personal tone are considered equally important...

Intellectual Role:

The most important role of the online tutor, of course, is that of educational facilitator. As in any kind of teaching, the moderator should focus discussions on crucial points, ask questions and probe responses to encourage students to expand and build on comments... Weaving together the often disparate concepts, so typical of the medium, is acknowledged to be one of the most highly prized skills of educational computer conferencing (Mason, 1991)

In the case of our Corporate Marketing course on LeaRel, some moderating tips would include:

- Welcoming newcomers and bringing them up-to-date with the ongoing discussions, and thanking contributors for their efforts, and insights.
- Sorting out online confrontations through mutual agreement.
- Organizing online events and meetings. For example, getting an eminent corporate manager to converse with the students
- Weaving rich, intellectual, thought provoking conversations by providing hints, tips, links, and resources on effective Corporate Marketing.

Example

The instructor/moderator initiating the permission marketing discussion would firstly lay down the objectives of the discussion, i.e., to explore the issues regarding the successful use of permission marketing strategies. He would provide the time frame and the norms of the discussion. He would collect rich sources of material on permission marketing and initiate specific discussions, say on Chapter 8 of Godin's book. This would be his organizing role.

After the discussions have started, he would guide and facilitate the discussion by offering more clues, opinions, and resources. For example, how is the notion of "personalization" related with permission marketing? How would one measure the ROI (Return On Investment)? If there were any confrontations, he would step in and aim to sort out the differences. If a student missed a class, he would provide the scaffolds for that student to catch up. If some students are dormant, he would send emails to them, urging them to contribute. These would be the instructors/moderator's social role.

The instructor/moderator's intellectual role would involve weaving together stimulating points and perspectives with the ongoing discussion. For example, he might intervene with questions like, Is permission marketing possible without the Internet? What could be the possible legal issues associated with the wrongful use of customers' personal data? Can we build on permission marketing and create

another killer marketing strategy? How will wireless technology affect permission marketing? By asking such creative and facilitating questions, the instructor/moderator can use raise the level of motivation and involvement in the discussion.

Face-to-face meetings

In our culture the face-to-face encounter is the ideal paradigm of the meeting of minds. Communication seems most complete and successful where the person is physically present 'in' the message. This physical presence is supposed to be the guarantor of authenticity: you can look your interlocutor in the eye and search for tacit signs of truthfulness or falsehood, where context and tone permit a subtler interpretation of the spoken word (Feenberg, 1989, p.22).

Face-to-face meetings reinforce the online social relationships and provide a context around which learners can share and discuss issues and ideas. Purely online interactions are devoid of context, which is an important factor in social interactions:

[C]reating a purely electronic or 'virtual' meeting space results in a loss of context. Contextualisation is the weak link in computer conferences, far more so than in familiar communications systems. The absence of tacit cues and coded objects strands participants in a contextual void that may leave them literally speechless. The uncertainty of a poorly contextualised communication leads to defensive withdrawal (Feenberg, 1989, p.36).

In order to strengthen the foundations of context and social interactions, regular face-to-face meetings are crucial. Further, as with virtual meetings, these face-to-face interactions should also involve absorbing learning activities.

For example, along with the LeaRel, the Corporate Management course could have some sort of a physical "Learning Club" that could be used for the following:

- As a library resource: Learners can be offered a wide selection of books, articles and journals on Corporate Management.
- For holding seminars: Eminent corporate managers could be invited to share their experience with the learners.
- Having table-talk discussions: Learners could discuss case studies, trends and analyses from the corporate world
- Indulging in role-playing games: Learners can view different perspectives by taking on different roles.
- Having presentations: Learners can share their findings, analyses, reports or, projects with others
- Holding events and rituals: There could be debate events and a monthly debriefing ritual where learners can share and track their progress

Example

On a particular evening, the instructor/moderator could organize a special seminar on permission marketing. He might invite several managers from companies using permission marketing strategies to talk about their experiences. This would provide a theme for social interactions to evolve around. Another outcome of such interaction could be the formulation of a permission marketing strategy for some industry, say, the Airline Industry. By working together, groups of students could share their experiences and ideas and come up with a plan they could present to others. Indulging in face-to-face

interactions not only builds stronger relationships, but also offers an opportunity to learn from the rich contexts.

In conclusion, we can say that although learning is considered to be an inherently social act, creating and fostering an online environment that affords rich social interactions is far from just putting up the tools to aid the communication. Although the tools do play an important role, the main criterion for creating a successful online learning community depends more on the energy, creativity and approach of its hosts on being able to achieve the goals of the community by facilitating rich online as well as offline interactions.

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