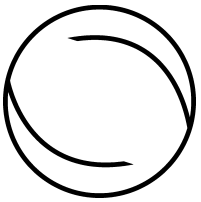

Backstage with the Knowledge Boys and Girls: Goffman and Distributed Agency in an Organic Online Community

Drew A.R. Ross

Abstract

An institutionally independent organic online learning community (OOLC) founded and populated by London cabbies-in-training, more commonly known to the world and to themselves as 'Knowledge Boys and Girls', is described here. Qualitative discourse analysis of message board transcripts and interviews with members was undertaken in an effort to elucidate benefits that accrue to OOLC members. Goffman's theory of region behaviour is enlisted to explain why frank, collegial and sometimes confessional interactions with peers might take place in such an online venue. This article suggests that through such candid interactions among peers, learners create a back-region that allows participants to compare themselves with one another, cultivate friendships and practise for high-stakes assessments. OOLC members take advantage of the pseudonymity provided by their electronic social space to engage in behaviours that, if they occurred in a front-region, might invite damage to a learner's reputation as a pre-service cabbie. The online community BR becomes a sanctuary of sorts for taking social and academic risks, one where potential adverse consequences are few and benefits are legion.

Keywords: Goffman, sociocultural, back-region, front-region, dramaturgical sociology, online learning communities, self-directed learning, adult learning. Internet research

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Introduction

Self-organizing and Self-governing Learning Communities

Online communities have been the focus of a substantial amount of research over the past fifteen years. Yet precious little of this work has been on online networks of learners who locate one another outside the formal frameworks of educational institutions. Instead, most research on online learning communities has concentrated in the main on programmatic learning: courses, classes and training offered through schools and universities. However, a quick look through the directory listings of a site such as Yahoo! Groups reveals that there are dozens upon dozens of learning communities created and operated *by learners, for learners*. There has been, and still remains, a dearth of published research on independent, self-organizing online learning communities such as these. This issue was only very recently brought to light in an article by Clark (2003) that sounded a call-to-arms for social scientists to begin to make such groups, which we have called 'organic online learning communities' (OOLCs), the focus of their research (p. 664).

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OOLCs are distinct from online-course communities or more traditional online learning networks primarily because of the notable absence of an instructor or teacher. While some OOLCs do make use of moderators, these are drawn from the learner population and not imported into administrative roles. Learners who are part of OOLCs therefore control almost every aspect of their own online spaces, as well as what takes place within them. The implications of this are that OOLCs are able to serve members' unaddressed needs in ways that top-down, externally controlled groups might not. This is true both for issues related to learning and to lifestyle alike — although this distinction is a fuzzy one, as much of what characterizes a learner's life is affected by his/her ongoing training. Indeed, OOLCs are home to conversations that do not restrict themselves neatly to examinations or course content; they host a broad spectrum of discussions that are sometimes clearly connected to disciplinary learning tasks, and that sometimes appear purely social, even phatic.

Founders of OOLCs are also not generally technology experts — many of these communities begin life on very simple, free-to-use content management systems such as Yahoo! Groups or MSN. The barriers to creating and maintaining such groups seem to have diminished substantially in the past ten years, allowing *ad hoc* networks of learners to take full advantage of this new simplicity and affordability. Some OOLCs elect to consolidate their operations in a horizontal integration with other similar groups that serve related or identical populations but, absent this restructuring, the vast majority of OOLCs remain unaffiliated with anyone except the other learners who populate them.

Because OOLCs have not been well characterized in the social science literature, a case study approach, one that offers richly detailed descriptions of a small sample of OOLCs, was undertaken as a first step in the lengthy process of understanding these communities better. This article describes findings from one OOLC case study, conducted as part of a larger three-case endeavour that explored the notion of user-benefit derived from participation in an OOLC. The learner cohort studied here is made up of pre-service London cabbies, who call themselves 'Knowledge Boys and Girls' (KB/KGs) and who are among the most specialized and highly trained professionals in the world.

Knowledge Boys and Girls

London licensed taxi drivers must complete an extended period of training that lasts, on average, about four calendar years. During this time, these pre-service cabbies must acquire tacit knowledge of all 25,000 streets in the metropolitan London area within a six-mile radius of Charing Cross Tube Station. To add to the difficulty of these requirements, these learners must also know the precise location of literally *every* public facility and space in London — every single restaurant, church, travel agency, shop, graveyard and post office (to name but a few) must be accounted for here. Collectively, this navigational subject matter is known as 'The Knowledge'.

The overwhelming majority of KB/KGs train by spending several hours every day on a motor scooter with a clipboard-mounted map bolted to the windscreen,

riding all over London. Astoundingly, learners are given very little guidance by London's automotive transportation authority, the Public Carriage Office (PCO). The entire curriculum of The Knowledge is contained in a pamphlet-thin 'Blue Book' that contains 400 sample trips (recently reduced to about 320) across the metropolitan London area. The PCO provides almost no instruction to learners, apart from suggesting that they travel along all of these trip routes (referred to as 'running routes' and 'runs') to help them learn the layout of the city. These routes are made up of two 'points' and look deceptively simple:

'Minories, to Twelve Trees Crescent' *or*

'Society of Friends Meeting House, to Shell-Mex House' (PCO 2000)

However, locating and travelling from starting to ending points makes up only a small part of the task of completing a run — each point comes with a ¼ mile radius of buildings that must be seen and noted, not to mention all the buildings and facilities along the route which also must be mentally filed away for future reference. Just riding through 400 routes can, and often does, take two years of daily driving. Moreover, figuring out the best approach to learning all of the hundreds of thousands of points around London takes a very long time, and is frequently cited as the source of immense frustration among Knowledge Boys and Knowledge Girls.

KB/KGs are tested first at approximately a year into their studies, when they go to the PCO for a written examination that includes multiple-choice questions and a blank map of some small section of London that they must correctly label. If they pass this first stage, learners can proceed to an extended series of oral examinations called 'Appearances', nine or more of which generally take place at regular intervals over the following two or three years. At Appearances, KB/KGs must be able to prove their mastery of city geography by puzzling out mentally and then speaking aloud the quickest route between *any* two random points in London that are chosen by the examiner, inclusive of unidirectional roads and tricky traffic schemes (Skok 2000) — all without the luxury of a map.

Despite the daunting volume of information to be mastered and the battery of difficult examinations to be completed, KB/KGs generally undertake The Knowledge as solo-learners and spend years studying without the sorts of support networks that formal educational institutions offer. There are a few private 'Knowledge Schools', but they are expensive and inconvenient for most KB/KGs who often also work full time. In light of this, it is easy to see how a Knowledge Boy/Girl could quite easily study for years, never encountering another fellow learner, except at examinations and the initial orientation session for new KB/KGs. Such potential for isolation in this endeavour is not only great, but quite unusual for such an intensive programme of training.

An OOLC for Pre-service Cabbies

CabbieCall (a pseudonym) is an online community of Knowledge Boys and Girls that was created in 1999 by a KB who found almost nothing on the Internet that might help him in his 'cabology' studies. He approached a web-savvy friend

(who remains the site's webmaster to this day), and together they designed, built and administered the site. At its peak, CabbieCall received visits from upwards of 1,000 unique addresses per week, representing an estimated membership of at least a few hundred users. Its traffic has since declined by about 20–30%, owing to the availability of competitor websites and corporate study packages that include membership to a proprietary online community. CabbieCall does not possess a sophisticated layout, but it does offer an enormous collection of resources for KB/KGs who are in all of stages of completing The Knowledge, from their first-day intake interview to their final road-test. Figure 1 shows what the site offers from its main navigation frame.

The scale and comprehensiveness of the curricular information offered to users free of charge in the massive databases (point addresses, routes, mock exams, etc.) are, on their own, a tremendous resource for learners. Furthermore, it is very simple for users to contribute new items to the database.

However, the more socially interactive sections of this website are of primary interest here, as these are not only the most-visited parts of CabbieCall (Webmaster 2001); they also represent one of the few venues where otherwise atomized KB/KGs can converse with one another. As was true of participants in Koku et al.'s (2001) study of scholarly networks, the members of CabbieCall eschewed their synchronous communications options during the data collection period for this study, instead opting to converse solely through CabbieCall's asynchronous message boards. Therefore, it is these message boards that form the core of one dataset sampled here.

Methods and Analysis

Sampling OOLC Discourse (Dataset 1)

Although this study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods in its analysis of learner interaction in OOLC space, only the qualitative discourse analysis is relevant to the findings presented in this article. A longitudinal approach — sampling by date, across time — made good sense for this study as an exploratory project, as such a method is capable of capturing a wide range of users and topics discussed, if enough messages are examined. Ideally, the sampling window should give a natural sense of the posting cycles in the group; in addition, sampling should not cut short most exchanges, nor should it pick up too many in mid-conversation. Preliminary results from a pilot study showed that two weeks was an adequate, if slightly short, sampling window. That frame

Figure 1.
Content of CabbieCall

- synchronous chat room
- asynchronous message board
- several online maps of London
- two databases of point addresses
- practice written exam
- message board for learners seeking study partners
- for-sale message board
- adverts page with jobs and rental announcements
- web-based form for users to submit their own point addresses to the site databases
- updated list of points featured in Appearances during the previous week
- very candid beginner's guide to doing The Knowledge

was therefore doubled to one full month in order to yield enough data to give a representative sense of the kinds of interactions that take place in CabbieCall. Because posting frequency was occasionally erratic, a minimum of 100 messages was also set, in case the group temporarily went quiet during the data collection period — something that has taken place once or twice in the group's history. Given that most threads contained just a few exchanges, 100 messages seemed likely to capture the complete cycle of at least a few dozen discrete threads. Access to the group was straightforward, as it is open to the public, with no barriers to access. However, all usernames in this dataset were changed, to protect OOLC members. Finally, there is no KB/KG academic year, and conversations in CabbieCall are consequently not typically seasonal, as might be expected for other learner-groups that follow a more traditional academic schedule, so the data collection period was not tied to programmed events — any stretch of time in the calendar year was as good as any other.

Interviewing OOLC Members (Dataset 2)

One goal of this research was to hear from OOLC members themselves why they participated in these online learner networks. Certainly, observing and analysing their discourse provides some insight into this; however, rather than wait for members to spontaneously begin reflection on their own participation in the message forums, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of learners. CabbieCall KB/KGs do not create persistent online profiles or frequently include information about their offline identities in their postings and, as a consequence of this, it was necessary to either post to the CabbieCall message board, asking for willing interview participants, or contact interview candidates directly via the email addresses they included with their postings. A passive approach seemed ill-advised, as participants would self-select and might not meet posting frequency and volume criteria. Furthermore, a then-embryonic sense that these groups provide users with a place where they can express themselves freely, and in often rude and puerile ways, made a more private research approach to conducting formal, analytical interactions with users more appealing, as it might prevent them from self-censoring and becoming too self-conscious about their OOLC practices.

In order to ensure that interviews yielded rich, lengthy responses, Bampton and Cowton's (2002) technique of splitting up email interviews into multiple parts was employed. Using a three-part interview structure, with questions in each successive email exchange evolving from and tapping responses given in previous rounds, terse responses that hampered the pilot study were avoided. It is worth noting here also that one of the respondents opted to conduct his interview via telephone, as he insisted — despite his active participation in an online community — that his computer skills were not good. In the end, informed consent was obtained from six KB/KG candidates, but only three progressed on the email interview schedules, plus one via telephone. Two left the study voluntarily when it became clear that email interviews were going to be somewhat extended conversations and would take at least a few hours of their time. All told, four of ten solicited CabbieCall members completed the full interview

scheme, yielding a response rate of 40%. Finally, a member check email was sent to all participants at the completion of data analysis, offering a general summary of the study's findings about OOLCs and about their community in particular. Participants were asked to share their thoughts about the early findings, and two out of the four (50%) interviewed CabbieCall members did so.

Field-notes and Observations: Secondary Data

As a means of contextualizing OOLC members' discourse, background interviews and observations were conducted several months before the primary data collection detailed above. Five additional learners, all at various stages of completing The Knowledge were interviewed in person and observed while engaged in authentic KB/KG practices, at the PCO and in a Knowledge School. The goals for these field-notes, conversations and observations were not so much to produce analysable data as to provide a sense of what daily life was like for these learners, as well as to provide insight into their idiosyncratic vocabulary: the Knowledge Boys and Girls use quite a bit of jargon in their online posts (and in physical-world conversations, when these occur). As this researcher has never trained as a London cabbie, it became clear early in the planning phases of this work that without a crash-course in the KB/KG argot, CabbieCall conversations might remain impenetrable.

Qualitative Data Analysis of Datasets

The two primary sets of discursive data collected for this study: a large corpus that included 234 message board postings to CabbieCall make up a rich collection of exchanges among learners *in situ* and represent a complete historical record of asynchronous discourse in CabbieCall during mid-2002 (and from chat room records, there is no evidence of synchronous interaction taking place during this time). In contrast to these, the four three-part interviews conducted with active OOLC users were semi-structured dialogues between the learner and an interested outsider who has spent a significant amount of time learning about the language and practices that characterize the OOLC. This is all to say that although both of the two primary data sources for this study are discursive and feature the voices of learners, they are very different kinds of data that represent history, practice and reflection in two distinct formats.

Because self-directed, self-organizing learning groups are so under-researched, an exploratory, descriptive and qualitative approach — yet one that could reveal theoretical features upon careful, methodical reflection — seemed to suit the study. Moss and Shank's (2002) exhortation that online learning communities *must* be studied using qualitative analysis makes considerable sense when one considers that OOLCs are flagrantly textual spaces. Not only do words make up the discursive remnants of information transmission among members, they also act, like Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) bricks, as socio-textual elements that create the scene, the stage and the action for what takes place in these groups. An inductive, grounded theory (GT)-inspired approach was therefore selected (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990) for the message board

corpus, due in large part to GT's central philosophy of pattern-seeking in complex textual data, one that allows the data to reveal the contours of its own structure, rather than deductively imposing a propositional structure upon it. ATLAS/ti, a qualitative data analysis software application designed for a GT approach, was used to facilitate organization of the large number of messages, as well as the codes, code families and memos produced during the analysis process. A similar, GT-inspired close reading of the interview data was also performed; however, this time, emergent key themes were organized into a graphical meta-matrix (Miles and Huberman 1994; Fielding and Lee 1998) to allow for visualization of cross-group and within-group patterns.

Finally, themes and patterns from the interviews were brought together with the code families and sub-codes from the message board analysis in an axial comparison, performed here to supply a more diachronic and cross-activity perspective. Using both of these analytical artefacts together, it was possible to identify practices that did not play out at the level of the individual utterance, message or thread. That is, complex interactions sometimes straddled code families and message threads or took place partially via private back-channels and were therefore invisible in the message board data — the juxtaposition of users' OOLC text alongside their reflections cast new and different light on the data.

Findings and Theoretical Interpretation

OOLC Discourse Typology and Macro-scale Practices

GT analysis of the message board data yielded a classification system that was able to account for all of the utterances and speech acts (Ross 2003) within the OOLC, as well as in the other two case studies represented in the larger work. Eight code families and 39 sub-codes comprise a model that describes in surprisingly full detail an emergent typology of OOLC discourse. Furthermore, when interview themes were included in a further round of analysis, three macro-scale practices were identified: Reflective Self-positioning (RSP), Affective Register Interaction and Expertise Pooling.

Reflective Self-positioning (RSP) is characterized by four constituent behaviours, some of which may occur in tandem with one another: sharing personal learning histories, participating in the OOLC in order to feel 'not alone', building intersubjectivity, and benchmarking (members comparing their own progress and status to that of their peers). All four of these constituent behaviours help learners develop a sense of their own place within their discipline's training landscape and allow them to reference themselves to other learners — something that provides their education with an indexicality (Nunberg 1993) that, especially in the case of KB/KGs who may never meet one another, they may otherwise lack. *Affective Register Interaction* describes a set of activities that reflect how CabbieCall users utilize their OOLC as an extension of their socio-emotional sphere: using the OOLC for explicit expressions of emotion, establishing self-identified friendships, and simulating a therapy- or support-group. Finally, *expertise pooling* comprises four behaviours: contributing to content-item databases (maps, Appearance questions, practice routes), posting content

information to assist other users, acting as a node in a knowledge-capital network that can be queried about content and process alike, and mentoring less-experienced learners. This last macro-scale practice makes an OOLC seem much more like a Wiki than a classroom, as reciprocity and mutual respect for local, individual-level wisdom of one's peers is more the guiding ethos than is a more traditional tacit acknowledgement of an instructor's authority and claims to knowledge.

The Trouble with Candour

Despite this thorough model of OOLC practices, two types of interaction remained puzzling. One of these two 'troubling' themes, candour, is discussed here. Although frank, often confessional sharing among CabbieCall members could be categorized using the coding framework, it did not make much sense from an educational perspective. This 'troubling' theme was therefore leveraged to drive a theoretically motivated re-reading and re-interpretation of both the study's findings and of the raw data. Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to sociology was used as an organizing concept that not only offered a way of understanding *what* benefits might be provided through personal and professional disclosures that ranged from the formal to the bawdy, it also offered a way of comprehending *how* these same benefits might be realized in an OOLC.

The centrepiece of Goffman's theory of 'performative sociology', an approach to understanding interaction that conceives of people as stage actors (sometimes working in teams) engaged in a variety of situation-specific performances, each of which may require different actions, props, gestures and lexicons, is his description of 'regions' and 'region behavior' — an idea to which he devotes more than an entire chapter (1959: 106) in his seminal text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman describes regions as venues for performances. Region boundaries are more precisely sense-boundaries, not necessarily physical boundaries — whispering to a colleague sitting adjacent at a staff meeting might constitute a separate region from that of the rest of the table, bounded by the barrier to perception of the interlocutors' lowered voices (p. 106). According to Goffman, high-stakes, often formal performances take place in what he calls front-regions (FRs) or frontstages. It is in the front-region where performers make contact with an audience of others, often with an eye towards producing some kind of monetary gain or aspirational outcome there. Behaviour in the FR is frequently characterized by politeness and careful attention to (sometimes formal) rules of decorum. Opposed, and often proximal to a FR is the back-region (BR), or backstage, a venue where Goffman asserts 'suppressed facts can make an appearance' (1959: 112) and where the impressions created in the FR are contradicted, often purposefully. The back-region is hidden from the front-region audience to a greater or lesser extent and is the locale where three primary practices occur: rehearsals for FR performances, training and prop-gathering for competent FR performances, and catharsis/relaxation.

Goffman uses Scottish crofters in the Shetland Isles as one case study of region behaviour, taking some memorable examples from a tourist restaurant that he calls the Shetland Hotel. He describes the scene there as physically and

socioculturally divided by the kitchen door: on the dining room side, strict formality is expected, whereas on the kitchen side, gossip and casual manners prevail (pp. 116–117). This depiction of informality stands in stark contrast to the behaviour in the parlour (dining room) of the restaurant, where hotel guests are served formally by these same staff, with at least the appearance of tidiness, hygiene and civility. The door that divides the kitchen from the parlour is the locus of great anxiety on the part of the staff, especially the managers, whose projected middle-class identities might be threatened by a lancing of the membrane between parlour front-region and kitchen back-region.

However, as suggested above, the division between FR and BR is not always clearly demarked by a physical barrier. Goffman comments that a BR can be instantiated wherever BR behaviour takes place — he discusses the use of 'backstage language or behavior' (p. 128) that is capable of transforming any venue into an *ad hoc* back-region:

> The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-ooperative decision making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress, 'sloppy' sitting and standing posture, use of dialect of sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and 'kidding,' inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The frontstage behavior can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this. (p. 128)

He goes on to note that 'by invoking a backstage style, individuals can transform any region into a backstage' (p. 128ff.), especially when the talk in this place makes explicit or implicit reference to activities in the FR. This can be true even if there is only a symbolic or metaphorical disconnect between the FR and the BR, and there does not need to be any sort of official designation of a space as a BR in order for it to be such. The spontaneous instantiation of a BR can be seen almost every work-day, outside office buildings where people gather on smoking breaks, given an excuse to escape the performative FRs of their workplaces by proscriptions against smoking indoors. The lure of the BR is strong enough that it is not uncommon to discover non-smokers mixed in with their nicotine-seeking colleagues.

In the example mentioned above, and indeed in every case Goffman describes, it is a FR that allows a BR to be conjured as its opposite entity. Backstages are unique to and joined to specific frontstages and create the opportunities to critique them *in their particularities*. This is important because to imagine a world with only one, all-purpose backstage would be to imagine a world where people possess one default, relaxed-state identity that is not performative — essentially a 'true self' to balance out a 'performing self', where the former shows through in the BR and the latter in the FR. If this were the case, complaining about one's job to one's spouse or a faraway friend would be every bit as satisfying as having the same gossipy conversation with a fellow employee, as all BRs would be equal. But this is not the case: the more people in a BR understand about a particular FR, the more likely they are to satisfy one another backstage. As a consequence, there can be no such thing as a generic back-region, as counterbalancing situationally specific events in a galaxy of frontstages would be very difficult. Each frontstage creates the possibility of and necessity for its own backstage through its singularities.

The idea that back-regions appear to be fundamentally necessary social creations appears to be especially true in situations where the front-regions they contrast are high-stakes environments. Ellen Barton's (2004) analysis comparing patient–doctor with doctor–doctor discourse during the prognosis phase of cancer treatment reveals that BR encounters between oncologists are invaluable in constructing reflective, sympathetic life-or-death exchanges with patients. In this way, backstage interactions can perform more than an ancillary role in quite momentous activities, and in some cases, may come to contribute as much or more to the success of an endeavour as do more visible frontstage interactions.

On occasion, the distinction between frontstage and backstage interaction is not entirely obvious, especially when the audiences for a FR performance overlap in part or completely with the BR audience, as Rebecca Tardy (2000) found in her ethnographic study of a mother/child playgroup. Meyrowitz (1985) similarly identifies the difficulties in declaring a particular social performance to be cleanly FR or BR in character, especially when modern communications technologies are utilized in interactions. Instead, he suggests that FR and BR are more 'flavors' of exchanges than anything else — an idea that reinforces the idea that region behaviour is fluid and not tied to a particular geography or physical-world space.

The CabbieCall OOLC as Back-region

Relating Goffman's concept of regional performances to activity that takes place via computer-mediated communications (CMC) has few precedents in the literature: Lori Kendall (2002: 126) has claimed that it is possible to create a backstage in a Usenet newsgroup, but does not go much further with her assertion, and Cavanagh (1999) has made some attempt to refract online community activity through the lens of Goffman-inspired stage-setting, but her interest seems mainly to extend to ethical implications of infringing upon a person's private virtual space. Hugh Miller (1995) offers another Goffman-inspired perspective, examining dozens of personal WWW homepages in an attempt to codify metaphors and semiotics used by website designers to represent themselves online. Miller addresses the confessional tone of autobiographical websites, especially as regards bending or breaking of institutional rules, yet never ties this to region behaviour. Miller's reluctance to take on website FR/BR dynamics may be due in part to the unknown audience to which a personal website frequently addresses itself — it is difficult to establish what kind of region is being accessed when an actor's performance is delivered blindly to millions of potential readers. Fortunately, that is not the case with CabbieCall and other OOLCs; these are created *for learners, by learners*, and despite the stray presence of outsiders (including Internet researchers), they are clearly primarily peer–peer interactional spaces with largely circumscribed audiences. Consequently, there appears to be ample evidence to support the argument that engagement in an OOLC is not only rife with backstage character, but that these venues themselves can be viewed as classic back-regions, albeit located on the Internet.

Yet if it is the case that the CabbieCall OOLC acts, at least in part, as a BR for Knowledge Boys and Girls, we must first be able to identify their corresponding

performative front-region(s). Clearly, at Appearances (and in the PCO, in general), as well as in Knowledge Schools (when these are employed), KB/KGs place themselves in positions where they are scrutinized by an audience of authorities who possess the capacity to alter the trajectory of their training. These settings are, as Goffman (1959) and Meyrowitz (1985) describe: formal, marked by decorum and politeness, and dedicated to displaying competence. In the same vein, riding around on their motor scooters, visibly engaged in the authentic learning tasks that comprise the bulk of their training places Knowledge Boys and Girls in the public eye, and for this reason, this venue may also be considered to be a FR for learners. The transparency of their training practices makes it important for these trainee cabbies to display strict adherence to traffic rules and on-road decorum, lest they be reported to the police — a potentially career-ending outcome. Having located the FRs for OOLC members, it becomes much easier to identify both backstage interaction and potential BRs, as much of what takes place in the backstage acknowledges frontstage performances. What follows here are four excerpts from CabbieCall that help illustrate how members are able to utilize their shared online space as textual backstage.

In Excerpt One, candour is on full display. In Turn 1, Keith reveas to hundreds of other CabbieCall members that he has been caught driving his motor scooter in a bus lane while studying and asks his fellow KB/KGs for advice. Keith's confession to his fellow learners offers evidence that CabbieCall is a space where members can feel comfortable with imperfect self-presentations. There is also a subtle criticism of the FR — another defining characteristic of a back-region — here, where Keith offers sardonic thanks for his traffic fine to London's mayor, Ken Livingstone, the titular head of the metropolis's public services, including the PCO. Turn 3 also reveals classic BR behaviour in Arnie_Putney's rather tart insult, an example of joking and 'playful aggressivity' that Goffman (1959:128) describes. This joking continues into Turn 4, where HenryD suggests that Arnie_Putney might actually be a minicab driver, part of a profession that

Excerpt One

[1]
got nicked in bus lane city rd trying to find crown house
i wrote to transport for london about doing the knowledge not interested
still £80 fine thanks ken livingston
any ideas
Keith
—-
[2]
keith tell the PCO and Pay The Ticket you will be okay but I dont think you will get off the Fine
Lex
—-
[3]
Yeah stay out of BUS lanes you twat.
Arnie_Putney
—-
[4]
As far as I know there no points on the licence,and regarding ARNIE last message he is propably a minicab driver,so do not worry about it.
HenryD (CabbieCall-0314)

Knowledge Boys and Girls widely consider to be full of incompetent, unexamined amateurs. It is also important to take note that during this exchange, useful information is offered to Keith in two of the three response turns, information that might assist him in continuing on as a KB. Jocular, biting, but ultimately helpful, this is precisely the kind of behaviour one might expect to find in a BR where team members discuss flaws in their FR performances.

Perhaps the most straightforward of the extracts from CabbieCall, Excerpt Two offers a very typical example of members utilizing the OOLC to 'school' (Goffman 1959:112) one another for FR performances. This excerpt also illustrates how KB/KGs use CabbieCall as a place where they can acknowledge major and minor deficiencies of understanding. In this fashion, CabbieCall serves as a virtual testbed for learners where they can tentatively offer their own understandings up for scrutiny so that these might be ratified or rejected by their differentially experienced peers. The jargon used here is notably BR-flavoured — terms such as 'yellow badge inners' are not part of a lay-person's vocabulary yet tersely transmit important information to CabbieCall's KB/KGs: specifically that Frankie is an experienced KB who is nearing the completion of his qualification. Perhaps this fact is what leads to SrGritty's even more succinct response in Turn 2. That is to say, if Frankie is at the penultimate phase of his studies, he is likely not to need a lengthy, narrative response to his question. Instead, he is given a blunt answer of the sort that one might expect in a BR: simply, yes.

Excerpt Three again provides evidence of playful 'aggressivity', kidding, profanity, elaborate griping and use of jargon. In this conversation alone, learners: poke fun at their vocation, comparing themselves to actor Bob Hoskins (notorious for his overacted Cockney characters); detail the demise of their personal relationships precipitated by obsessive studying; and admit to insecurities about their own progress. While Turn 2 seems to act mainly as comic relief, Boo's wittily honest response in Turn 3 merits close attention. First, this posting displays remarkable personal as well as professional candour. Further, Boo's admission that he feels inadequate in the face of other KB/KGs who appear to know more than he does offers some evidence that learners not only do engage in benchmarking behaviours, but also that they do sometimes feel comfortable enough to admit their insecurities to their fellow OOLC members. Notably, Boo even self-deprecatingly refers to perceiving himself to be a 'thicko' after just such progress comparisons. Interestingly, this sort of negative self-assessment in light of information about peers runs contrary to some research on social comparison (Festinger 1954; Gergen 1984, in particular); indeed, according to this literature,

Excerpt Two

[1]
re: yellow badge inners [*final-stage routes for advanced KB/KGs*]
can anyone help please when entering euston station from kings cross can you go left upper woburn pl. r endsleigh gardens r.gordon st. f.melton st.
Frankie
—-
[2]
yes
SrGritty (CabbieCall-2417)

Excerpt Three

[1]
How do you go about starting to learn the knowledge?
anonymous
—-
[2]
eat lots of pie and mash and keep repeating over and over again “luvvvvly jubbly” in a bob hoskins accent while walking like you have shin splints
Grime
—-
[3]
well what you do is
1=steal a postmans coat
2=buy a h90 [*motor scooter*] with 32k on the clock (the guy said, na mate it aint done the knowledge i job got a bird who lives in manchester!)
3=row with girlfriend or wife every night because you said street instead of rd on one run and she pulls you up on it.
4=leave the wife,cos calling over makes her fall asleep just when you are struggling to get a road right.
5=listen to every other knowledge boy talk and think to yourself he’s much better than me im such a thicko.
6=stop wasting time reading my bullshit and never give up !!!!
Boo (CabbieCall-1229)

people are prone to reconstruct a more positive self-perception and overestimate their own abilities when they learn about peer performances that might be superior to their own (Klein and Goethals 2002) — yet in this OOLC study, there exist several examples where learners openly describe their progress and understanding to be inferior to that of their peers. OOLC users’ exemption from more buoyant social comparison trends may have to do with the special status of the virtual space they share — because a BR is so fundamentally about pseudonymous, candid sharing, it leaves open the possibility for a more honest reappraisal of skills in a way that face-to-face contact might not. This may well be to do with the fact that in-person peer–peer learner comparison often retains some hint of the front-region, with participants remaining unwilling to abandon attempts to impress; whereas in an OOLC, protected by a username, there is less risk in ‘letting it all hang out’ and letting self-concept drift in the direction the evidence suggests it should. Such open sharing may create the frame of reference Herb Marsh (1984) deems necessary for learners to construct a realistic academic self-concept; indeed, when OOLC members do not encounter each other offline, online disclosures are the only information they could use to do this.

Excerpt Four again features a striking lexicon — terms such as ‘a 28 appearance’ and ‘my drop’ are typical of the almost telegraphic style used when KB/KGs communicate with one another in CabbieCall. Such communicative economy means that messages can be short but still evocative and rich in meaning, and the obscurity of the group’s vocabulary and usage acts a protective element that renders what is said in these spaces opaque to anyone who has not invested a significant amount of time in understanding The Knowledge. The shibboleth of esoteric language in CabbieCall works by preventing curious or accidental visitors to the OOLC from comprehending what is being discussed and, as a result, the virtual space can remain a BR with little attendant risk of poisoning a frontstage performance with the backstage secrets shared there, as they are so well disguised.

Excerpt Four

[1]
Just had a 28 appearance with Ms Wells and got the obligatory D. Has anyone got a C from her as I have not met anyone who has.
Crank
—-
[2]
I am well pleased to say that I got a C from her yesterday, it was my first appearance so didn't know what to expect but I have since heard that she is not that easy??? Timmy G —-
[3] I got a C it was my First 28 Day Appearance
Paulie
—-
[4]
I have not had her yet, but I am sure I will get a "d" all the rest seem to want to give me that.
Rob
—-
[5]
yes i got a c and got my drop 2 28,s
Devilish1
—-
[6]
She gave me a B on my first 28, was very fair if not very businesslike..
les (CabbieCall-0178)

According to one of the senior examiners at the PCO (Bishop 2001, *personal communication*), there is a real disconnect between the language used by the pre-service cabbies and the people examining them, which means that, in using esoteric language, CabbieCall users may be keeping out not only random members of the public, but also members of their discipline's governing body.

Two other important things take place in this excerpt. Firstly, there is clear criticism of the Appearance examiner, Ms Wells, a FR authority who assesses Knowledge Boys and Girls. She is famously difficult, as noted by the first three participants in the conversation. In Turn 4, there is also a broader snipe at the entire Appearance system when Rob somewhat jadedly resigns himself to scoring another 'D' — as if his actual performance is of no consequence. Goffman comments that 'the surest sign of backstage solidarity is to feel that it is safe to lapse into an asociable mood of sullen, silent irritability' (p. 132). While it is not strictly 'silent', Rob's quip certainly possesses a sullen, irritable and inconsolable timbre. Secondly, OOLC members use the opportunity presented by the question about Ms Wells to engage in benchmarking behaviour, comparing their own success with her to that of their colleagues. However, this demands a frank information exchange that might be unlikely to take place in a FR venue like the PCO. Crank's original query — whether it is possible to score anything higher than a 'D' grade from Ms Wells, requires exposure of heretofore private information from potential respondents: sharing behaviour that bears a strong resemblance to BR intimacy. It is also worth noting that not all the postings are negative — both Paulie and Devilish1 indicate that they have had some limited success with this examiner. Moreover, Les asserts that he thinks Ms Wells is 'fair'. Perhaps this last posting is made to dispel a building sense that scoring well on Ms Wells's exams is impossible, in turn implicitly encouraging OOLC members to persist in their efforts to succeed in this specific FR. However, it is not necessary that exchanges such as these provide solutions to the original

problem; not all critical perspectives voiced in a BR can be leveraged into something productive and solution-orientated. Sometimes, the backstage is simply a place to gripe about the front, to let off steam in a venue where candour will probably not have adverse consequences. A catharsis of irritation at Ms Wells may in fact be its own reward.

Discussion and Implications

Bounding the BR

Two main features work together to indemnify OOLC back-regions against intrusion: language and pseudonymity. As shown in the excerpts above, there is a considerable amount of ultra-idiosyncratic language used in CabbieCall, language that is anchored in the particular learning practices and culture of Knowledge Boys and Girls. Using such a learner-specific dialect allows members to include one another in their candour while excluding uninformed outsiders. CabbieCall is also able to bolster its status as a BR by decoupling offline identity from online action. Member-selected aliases (usernames) that do not necessarily bear connection to their offline identities reduce or eliminate the consequences of practising FR performances, criticizing the FR and engaging in 'inappropriate' banter. In this sense, the pseudonymity of the OOLC creates a virtual Comedia dell'Arte within which members are free to act in 'a backstage style' (Goffman 1959: 128), using screen-names instead of masks. Another related protection stems from CabbieCall's username lability, as the aliases chosen by members are not persistent across time. Every time a CabbieCall member contributes to the asynchronous message boards, s/he is given the chance to create a new username. This means that in the worst case scenario, if a CabbieCall member feels embarrassed, embroiled in conflict or stigmatized, s/he need only create a new username to begin again, *tabula rasa*. Even within the online space itself, there is protection for KB/KGs that allows them to be honest; such online pseudonymity in turn allows members to take full advantage of the BR 'buffer' (p. 114) that Goffman describes.

BR Affordances for Lurkers

In exploiting their virtual communities as classic back-regions, OOLC members are able to be open about their thoughts, criticize their front-regions, take part in embarrassing or profane talk, compare themselves with other learners, and test out their embryonic comprehension of content. Quite importantly, some of these affordances are available to lurkers who do not actively contribute to the message boards or chats. In particular, reading other users' candid accounts of their experiences and their understanding of content allows lurkers to engage in the reflexive self-positioning (RSP) macro-scale practice described earlier. Lurkers can also profit parasitically when other users share study tips or content such as point locations (as in Excerpt Two), even when they themselves do not post. This in turn provides non-participatory OOLC members access to some of the benefits of the Expertise Pooling macro-scale practice. It is perhaps more

difficult to imagine lurking users tapping into flows of affect and emotion that so many of the interviewees claimed to prize so highly, especially when these lurkers remain silent and invisible. Undoubtedly, these users cannot forge actual friendships with other members with whom they never communicate; but at the same time, it *is* possible to envision a lurker gleaning useful coping skills by observing 'support group'-style interactions that focus on members' feelings. In the end, non-participatory lurkers can indeed make significant use of an OOLC backstage, but appear to be largely excluded from its more affective benefits. However, this is not an irreversible situation, as joining in — also called 'de-lurking' — opens up this third macro-scale practice to them completely.

Why an *Online* Back-region?

Almost anyone who has spent time in a school or university will recognize that some of the back-region behaviours described here also take place in face-to-face, physical-world venues such as hallways, buses, student lounges and off-duty classrooms. It is not news that learners find places and spaces away from their instructors where they can relax, vent to one another and practise their performances. For Knowledge Boys and Girls, however, options for in-person BR interaction are either limited or non-existent — except for the small fraction of these learners who enrol at Knowledge Schools, KB/KGs generally do not see one another face to face unless they pass in the street on their motor scooters or encounter each other at the PCO while waiting for an Appearance. These learners are left with few methods by which they can forge relationships with their peers. Some do form in-person study dyads ('callover partnerships') when they happen to find other learners who live or work nearby, and these certainly have the potential to acquire backstage flavour; but as long as the WWW offers a means of putting Knowledge Boys and Girls in touch with dozens, hundreds or thousands of peers, it remains the simplest and most efficient means of finding collegial relationships and, in turn, building a BR.

In the end, despite any anonymity, members of CabbieCall are fundamentally and recognizably connected to one another by their shared motivation and interest in their discipline. In Goffman's words, they share a 'community of fate':

> In having to put on the same kind of performance, they come to know each other's difficulties and points of view; whatever their tongues, they come to speak the same social language. And while colleagues who compete for audiences may keep some strategic secrets from one another, they cannot very well hide from one another certain things they hide from the audience. The front that is maintained before others need not be maintained among themselves: relaxation becomes possible. (Goffman 1959: 160)

They may not know what other users look like or be able to call one another by their given names, but OOLC members do know that they hold in common a daunting task — becoming a practitioner in a very difficult field. They align themselves with one another by signalling belonging through displays of fluency with disciplinary jargon and their ability to parse arcane, ultra-succinct messages posted by other learners. Amidst, and perhaps in part because of these displays of belonging, CabbieCall KB/KGs discover adequate common ground to allow the establishment of an electronic back-region in their OOLC. This online zone

of safety offers a powerful tool to counterbalance the stresses of the high-stakes frontstage, providing members a chance to learn from their peers' experiences, commune with fellow learners candidly and pseudonymously (if they wish) and, perhaps most crucially, this is all done with almost zero risk of damage to members' all-important performative, frontstage selves. The online BR of an online learning community becomes a sanctuary of sorts for taking academic and social risks, one where potential consequences to offline reputations are few.

Institutional Implications

There is some evidence (Contreras-Castillo et al. 2004) that free-form online conversations among learners are of significant benefit to them and to learning performance; however, 'free' exchanges can never be entirely candid if they remain part of programmed coursework or affiliated with disciplinary governing bodies. Only when social space is unmoored from front-regions where learners are observed and assessed can the potential for a back-region even begin to evolve. Of course, not all learners are technically skilled enough to create venues similar to the CabbieCall OOLC for themselves, nor are they all necessarily aware when groups like these exist already — and literally hundreds of similar groups do. It is in the best interest of institutions (educational, corporate and professional alike) to make learners faced with strenuously difficult learning tasks aware of these groups, rather than trying to create and integrate these spaces into their own institutional infrastructure. Doing so alleviates the burden on educators themselves to attempt to create suitable online space for informal interaction *within* online course- or training-provision and allows instructors to focus attention on learner achievement. Likewise, encouraging participation in these independent groups may create social presence (Gunawardena 1995, Gunawardena and Zittle 1997) *around,* but crucially *not within,* a particular online learning framework.

Certainly, helping students feel connected to similar others and facilitating that sense wherever possible is a worthwhile goal for any programmed (on- or offline) course — it is simply important to keep in mind that participating in an OOLC may enhance these impressions in a way that, under the surveying gaze of an instructor, might otherwise be difficult. Moreover, the freedom of expression and the sheer scale of interconnections to other remote learners offered by an OOLC make it a vastly superior resource to an in-course discussion space. Furthermore, creating institutionally owned free-exchange venues drains both technological and human resources — both of which may be scarce, even in a for-profit organization, whereas identifying and publicizing apposite OOLCs is simple and inexpensive, as most of these groups are easily locatable through search engines or community portals. Letting learners know about these communities could become part of early-phase orientation sessions, or could be done by providing links to OOLCs on institutional websites. No matter the method used to encourage learners, it remains axiomatic that these venues remain pseudonymous and independent so that catharsis, tentative knowledge sharing, and candid criticism of both the frontstage and fellow learners can take place unimpeded.

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