Concerning the Cohesive Nature of CSCL Communities

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of community relative to CSCL networks. Starting from the point of view that a learning community is a group of individuals who engage in discourse for the purpose of advancing the knowledge of a collective, I suggest that these communities are held together by four cohesion factors; namely, *function*, *identity*, *discursive participation*, and *shared values*. An examination of learning communities suggests that students' knowledge building should improve if CSCL designs attend to, and support, each of the cohesive factors.

Keywords: communities, knowledge building, learning communities

Introduction

In response to a growing interest in notions of learning communities (Brown, 1994; Scardamalia et al., 1994; Wenger, 1998), and knowledge societies (Keating, 1995) this paper addresses the concept of 'community' that has arisen as a result of technologically inspired reforms in education. Interest in computer supported learning communities is not an isolated response to the educational possibilities afforded by increased computing power and world wide networking, but is part of a reform movement addressing new epistemologies (Gee, 1992) and psychologies (Harre & Gillett, 1994) for education. These innovations place greater importance on the role of discourse in the production and understanding of knowledge. Consequently, scholars are calling for more talk, more interaction, and more attention to the role of discourse in the advancement of knowledge within the classroom-- to create what Brown and Campione (1990) have termed *a community of discourse*.

What is community?

Specifically, what is 'community', and how should it be held together in CSCL contexts? I ask these questions to better understand the educational design issues both pedagogical and technical. My approach, then, is not necessarily to define 'community', but to deconstruct the concept into its major elements. These are the elements that hold a community together; that make it work and distinguish it between a group of individuals and a cohesive collective. To the degree that community must be defined, I want a robust definition, so I look to how others, across a variety of disciplines, have defined the term-- at the same time, I am mindful that some scholars argue that a theory of community development still remains to be mapped out.

By creating a working model of community cohesion particular to knowledge advancement--rather than for anthropological or sociological purposes--the intention of this examination is to identify a series of variables which in varying combinations could maximize the potential for learning communities to occur. In other words, instead of delineating norms of a given community - rationale of the community, codes of conduct, and so on, I want to concentrate on how communities cohere. Therefore, since 'community' is probably best defined as an amalgamation of ideas, the sources of which necessarily reflect the varied nature of human experience, I have taken a decidedly interdisciplinary perspective.

After examining the work of analysts in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, history, political science and education, several patterns emerge as consistent touchstones. Within these patterns, four major strands stand out--citizenship; theories of idea exchange; the social fabric; and learner cognition. Within these categories lie the four factors that allow communities to cohere. I refer to these as the glue factors. Each factor consists of patterns that are repeatedly identified either explicitly or implicitly in the literature and are defined as the primary forces that serve to cohere and consolidate community. They may be present in any configuration with different factors assuming primacy in particular formations. The factors are comprised of the following: function; identity; discursive participation; and shared values. Although by no means an exhaustive list of cohesive forces that characterize community, the glue factors identified here are closely linked to one another: changes in one will inevitably have an effect on all factors.

Function

Function is understood to be the specific purpose to which end a given collectivity is formed. All the following factors to be discussed - discourse, identity, and shared values - are significantly determined by functional interests. Function generally evolves around an ideal selected by a group either explicitly or as its de facto *raison d'être.* The nature of group interaction is determined by the functional ideal of the collective. Function, then, is variously constructed within different understandings of community, the rhetorical ideal often adhering to one or more of the following precepts: a) interdependence; b) democracy/social order; c) cultural productivity; d) knowledge transfer; and e) consolidation of identity. Interdependence is a function frequently cited by analysts as the prime cohesive force of community.

Identity

Peculiar to the phenomenon of community is the notion that the process of identification is synonymous with that of participation. Identity is constructed through a series of patterned interrelations that after having become ritualized, consolidate identity. Although this process sounds rather dry, the question of identity - its stability, security, borders, definitions, homogeneity, etc - has profound emotional claims upon members of the community, and according to Postman (1995), rightly so. Without a doubt, of the four factors discussed it features one of the highest degrees of emotional investment on the part of its membership. As Goulbourne (1991) notes, citizenship in a state functions in two separate dimensions: in legal terms, one is acknowledged as a citizen by subscribing

to a predetermined set of institutional rules regarding status; in emotional terms, however, one is not recognized as a citizen without a history of participation. Participation then, as pointed out earlier, is vital to the consolidation of identity. Aside from its signifying role within the semiotics of self-actualization, participation also emotionally legitimates membership. And, as a complement to Wenger's (1998) notion of reification, it demonstrates a history of allegiance to norms, principles, and causes espoused by the community.

Discursive Participation

Discourse may be identified as the medium of community. Taylor (1982), for example, analyzes community as an essentially communicative phenomenon. According to Edge (1994), a community is an amalgamated sense of memory and hope; a series of remembered social intertwining that result in a contemporary shared discourse. Elias (1994) explores in great detail how this operates as a power dynamic, and the ways in that its ability to cohere group identity may later serve to bar others who are not historically situated in a temporally constructed dialogue. Particular communities will spawn discourses unique to their function. As such, the discourse of communities devoted to a trade in ideas may still differ radically in terms of function. In constructs of community that are pedagogically determined, discourse is functionally applied as largely creation and transfer of knowledge (Brown, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991) such that a given discourse does not merely represent the community, it *is* the community. As Taylor suggests, the very act of communicating is a self-reflexive actualization of the idea of community. Within such an understanding, then, both the possibilities and constraints of conceptualization are determined by the values that a society holds. It is the shared values of a community which determine whether ideas will be valued, rights respected, and power distributed.

Shared Values

Interestingly, the most contentious issue in the current debate on communal cohesion may well be the identification and attainment of shared values. Black (1988) has noted that any deliberate attempt to create community is essentially self-conscious and that in order for an active discourse to be maintained, certain values have to be in place. These include tolerance (Black,1988); a sense of collective responsibility (McKnight, 1994); selfless altruism (Edge, 1994; Bellah et al, 1985); pride in (historical) memory (Postman, 1995; McKnight, 1994; Edge, 1994); valuing of inquiry (Brown, 1994; Wuthnow, 1989); and valuing of consensus (Brown, 1994; Taylor, 1988). All of these values foster what Goulbourne calls "a *will* . . . to participate." However, the arena of shared values is a critically charged one because contemporary heterogeneous communities have experienced an explosion in value diversity. Postman (1995) steps equally gingerly around the debate on multiculturalism, preferring instead a kinder, gentler "pluralism." Even Brown (1994), who, like Postman, recognizes the vital role played by diversity, still insists that members new to the community "adopt the discourse structures, goals, values, and belief systems of the community"(p.10). However, we should recognize that in the democratic discourse espoused by Postman (1995) and Rheingold (1994) as well as the scholarly discourse explored by Brown (1994) and Wuthnow (1989), discourse explicitly

emerges from a set of values. If tolerance and diversity are built into one's discursive model, then those, too, are values. Similarly, the sense of valuing difference and dissent is itself value-specific. In other words, the parameters are already set as soon as one walks into the space of "valued diversity".

Conclusions

Current trends toward thinking about learning and knowing encompass social as well as individual activities (Woodruff & Meyer, 1997; Pea, 1993) and acquiring knowledge is understood as a broadly social practice engaged with peers and more knowledgeable others (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). The concept of learning communities figure prominently in these approaches. In this paper I look at the concept of community in relation to cohesive CSCL networks. Brown and Campione (1990) suggest a learning community is defined as a group of individuals who engage in discourse for the purpose of advancing the knowledge of a collective--to participate in what Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) call knowledge-building. In elaborating this definition, I have suggested that a community is held together by four cohesion factors: 1) *function*, 2) *identity*, 3) *discursive participation*, and 4) *shared values*. Briefly, function is the goal or purpose of the community; identity is the validation of 'self' through membership; discursive participation is the means by which the members' discourse helps to advance the function or goal of the community; and, shared values are the global beliefs held by members which unite them and help to promote an emerging discourse. Theoretically, CSCL designs that attend to, and support, these cohesive factors should see better understanding and greater knowledge advances by the collective.

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