

# Negotiation, identity and knowledge in e-learning communities

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I wish to illustrate how groups of elearners in formal, accredited learning contexts develop as a community, and the way in which members of the group negotiate identity and knowledge. In doing this I draw on my experience of working with e-groups on the MEd in E-Learning at the University of Sheffield. Specifically I examine three egroups who exhibited a variety of collaborative processes, and show how they managed their learning experiences. Additionally I present the findings of a study looking at identity in e-groups and the development of community.

## COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

What is identity? Wenger (Wenger, 1998 Ch 6) suggests that we experience identity in practice: it is a lived experience in a specific community. We develop identity by looking at who we are in relation to the community in which we are practicing members. Practically, this occurs through participation in the work of the community.

The process of becoming accountable to the work and purposes of the group has been described by Wenger (1998, p152) as a display of competence, involving three dimensions:

*mutual engagement*: in which we develop expectations about how to interact, how to treat each other and how to work together.

*accountability to the enterprise*: the enterprise helps define how we see the world of the community. We develop a shared understanding of it, its culture and how to participate in its values and activities. We know what we are *there* for.

*a process of negotiating a repertoire*: through constant membership of the community we begin to understand its practices, interpret them and develop a repertoire of practice that is recognisable to members of the community. We make use of what has happened in the community as a way of achieving this.

According to Wenger, these three dimensions are necessary components of identity formation within the community of learners and lead to the development of competence.

Meaning needs to be negotiated through dialogue and discussion. In communities of practice “meaning making” is negotiated through the processes, relations, products and experiences of the community (Wenger, 1998).

In this paper, I will show how this takes place throughout the life of e-groups, and will indicate how negotiation is a central process which can take many forms. In doing this I will present:

An examination of three e-groups and the issues they faced in working collaboratively

An examination of identity in e-groups and the ways in which this helps foster community

## WORKING COLLABORATIVELY IN E-GROUPS

The work of three e-learning groups was analysed. Two of the groups (groups one and three) worked harmoniously, and successfully produced a collective end product, which they were happy with. The other group (group two) exhibited extreme anxiety and division, and required extra resources from its members in order to sustain itself and produce its collective end product. Anxiety became a major inward looking focus for this group, which had the effect of diverting it from effective collective production. It did produce a collaborative product, but one which the group was not entirely happy with. The patterns of work and communication of the three groups can be summarised as:

## Harmony, communication and conflict

Groups one and three have a high need to collaborate harmoniously. Their starting point is to make each group a really “good” collaborative group which works harmoniously, and they put considerable time and effort into ensuring this happens. They deliberately address the need to support differences and mutual recognition. They actively involve everyone in decision-making, group processes and production. They work in ways that are open and accessible to all members and make reference to this being an important requirement for success. They talk of “really wanting the collaborative project to work”. They could perhaps be described as being “dutiful”.

Group two supports difference but also uses it as a source of conflict. They bring “differences” to the forefront and use them constantly in negotiations and discussions. However, as a group they cannot seem to reconcile some important differences in a way that helps them work together and be productive. They therefore sub-divide to achieve their tasks. They also bring a high degree of closure to their group processes by the sub-groups using faxes, telephone, email and so on within the sub-group rather than conducting their work in the open forums, therefore making it impossible for others to participate and know what is going on. They never talk of “really wanting their collaborative project to work” as the other two groups do. They are perhaps less concerned with “duty” and less likely therefore to collaborate as a group and more likely to diverge, confront and question. Their high introspection causes them to constantly refer inwardly to themselves in a struggle to understand why they are working in the way they do.

All three groups at some point divide their work so that sub-groups can focus on accomplishing particular parts of the overall product. Groups one and three formally and openly divide and come to an agreement about how the sub-tasks relate to the final product. They support each other in their sub-group work, which is open and accessible to all members of the group. Group two works in sub-groups by default – perhaps as a mechanism for avoiding conflict in the large group. They cannot easily find a way of working as a community. It seems people therefore form liaisons in order to deal with the lack of agreement over the focus of their project. Collaboration in the sub-groups is carried out in closed circles, with little communication between sub-groups or, at times, within the large group. There is some evidence of the sub-groups deliberately keeping their work closed from others.

However, group two does see itself *as a group* – there is evidence of them comparing themselves to the other two groups and using them and their work as a reference point for themselves.

## Reflexivity within groups

Each group is highly reflective about its work and learning processes, but in group two reflection becomes something of an obsession, and actually becomes a major focus for the group without them collectively agreeing to it being so. It could be argued that in the absence of an agreed focus, this group “naturally” (because of its particular circumstances and dynamics) chooses its focus to be itself.

Considerable time, thought and energy is devoted to this by:

- the group struggling to understand itself. It has resource to communicating about its own dynamics as a way of explaining what is happening to itself, justifying its actions, controlling members actions, comparing itself to the other groups, accusing members about various aspects of their project work and generally ruminating on the sense of distrust within the group.
- Sub-groups devoting time in their chat sessions to trying to understand the group as a whole
- Individuals choosing to focus their research on finding out about group processes and dynamics

Contemporary psychological thinking about distrust in collaborative groups suggests that rumination and reflection is not always valuable in producing clarity regarding difficult situations or with producing insights into how to cope with them:

“..it seems reasonable to hypothesize that rumination about others’ motives and intentions in situations where concerns about trust already loom large will increase individuals’ distrust and suspicion of others’ behavior. In particular, one might argue that the more individuals ruminate about the intentions and motives underlying the behavior of other actors with whom they are interdependent in a trust dilemma situation, the greater their tendency to make more sinister attributions regarding their behavior.” (Kramer, 1999 p172).

The balance between taking time to ruminate and reflect, and that of leaving aside their differences and “moving on” cannot be an easy one to determine when a collaborative learning group is in the middle of a difficult dynamic. This

group could have chosen not to spend time ruminating and reflecting. They could just have got on with the “task” of producing a final product. But by focusing on themselves and their struggle to collaborate I think they show a real and genuine concern for each other. To ignore the issues they are facing would be tantamount to saying that they did not care. But there is evidence throughout their discussions that, at the individual level, they do care. They are trying to look after themselves. This is evidenced in part by them continuing to communicate and not give up. They even remark on this themselves, showing that they have a high degree of self-awareness. They do share and discuss, they produce work, and they never talk of splitting up or giving up.

## Group identity and self-identity

In his analysis of the self and society, Giddens (1991) suggests that:

“Self-identity (...) is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991, p52).

Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst R.D.Laing, Giddens suggests that one way of analysing self-identity is to consider those whose identity is fractured or disabled. From such a viewpoint, the ontologically insecure individual may display one or more of the following characteristics. They

- lack a consistent feeling of biographical continuity; they cannot sustain a continuous narrative about themselves.
- are in a constant state of anxiety, which prevents them from carrying out practical actions
- fail to develop trust in themselves and their identity, and often subject themselves to constant self-scrutiny

Can the concept of self-identity and the analytical framework provided above be applied at the group level? For example, can a group be described as being “anxious”? The analysis of the work of the three groups shows that they are all highly reflexive: they are aware of themselves as groups and address their histories, development and their future. The anxiety amongst the members of group two may work towards producing a sense of the group that is fractured or disabled. Participants subject their behaviour and thoughts to constant scrutiny, which at times becomes obsessive. This group is obsessed about questioning itself in a way that none of the other groups are. The other groups do reflect on their processes and procedures and use this as a source of learning. But at times group two is very single-minded about this, and it pervades the life of the group. The group never seems to get over its anxiety about itself, and the members constantly discuss and scrutinise themselves and their actions.

What does group two feel in danger of? Not achieving its objectives? Not “working” as a group? Not “fitting” into the required model of an effective group (whatever that is)?

The group doesn’t seem to know itself – a condition which Giddens (1991) suggests is necessary for ontological security. It seems to be struggling to find some kind of collective identity: some kind of ongoing narrative (Giddens p54) of itself. In a real sense it does not know who it is or where it is going. This seems to be a major source of anxiety. Members of the sub-groups try to work out how they came to be where they are, and how they can bring about change and development so that they can influence where the group collectively is going. But this is perhaps inevitably doomed to failure as long as it is the work of the sub-groups and not the work of the group as a whole. Factions, no matter how well intentioned and how insightful they are, cannot mend the fractured group. As long as some individual members are not involved in the project of making the group “better”, it is probably the case that the group will not function well as a collective. If some members of the group are with-holding their engagement, then the other members of the group will either

- carry on the group’s work without those people, or
- spend a lot of time and energy trying to understand why those people are engaging in the way they are, whilst at the same time not functioning as a group. They can function as sub-groups and get some of their work done, but the division will make it impossible for them to achieve a collective group product.

In the other groups there is a high sense of self-identity as a group. They seem to have a strong ongoing narrative, which they keep active throughout the collaborative project. These groups are inclusive and mainly work in harmony. Sub-groups evolve from collective work and discussion as a source of production which feeds into the main group task of producing the final product. Divisions, differences of opinion and so on exist, but the groups want to achieve and be successful, so they are handled with considerable understanding and willingness to be inclusive and

supportive. The focus on the well being of the members of the groups seems to ensure this, as well as each group's need to succeed. These two groups work at establishing their identity, constantly creating and sustaining it through reflexive processes.

### **Control and ontological security**

Implicit in the actions of groups one and three is a high degree of "routinised control" (Giddens, 1991 p56) which helps protect the members of these two groups against themselves. Their high need to collaborate and be productive within the agreed parameters of the course requirements may mean that each member monitors himself so as to prevent schism and division within the group. Competition and disagreement do exist, but are supported in subtle ways by processes of negotiation, give and take and reciprocity. Members are willing to "give" so long as that is taken as a criterion for existence in the group and for successful production.

Self-control can be a powerful mechanism in these two "successful" groups. The language used in these two groups is perhaps an indicator of this: it is always positive and the group members tell themselves that they are working well. They say they are collaborating and succeeding in their work. They sustain an ongoing narrative about collaboration and success, which is largely absent in group two. They believe what they say, and it has the effect of sustaining that belief. They trust each other in these circumstances. This helps produce a sense of ease within the group about who they are and how they are working. The effort needed to sustain the group is therefore greatly reduced, and with it any anxiety about the group is reduced. All of this helps the performance of the group.

On the other hand, the members of group two tell themselves they are not doing this and perhaps therefore reduce the chances of it happening? They come to believe that they cannot collaborate successfully. They cannot seem to begin to develop a positive ongoing narrative about themselves, let alone sustain it throughout their time together. This keeps the level of anxiety high within the group, which in turn has the effect of requiring extra resources from the members in their efforts to sustain the group. Their anxiety is a source of constant examination and questioning which diverts them from effective collective production.

There may be a need to control in order to produce harmony and effectiveness. The patterns of the work of the groups may indicate the ways in which control is established and maintained.

The conventionally "successful" groups discuss and support each other. Members do not go off and do their own thing. They do however work as sub-groups, but only after they have been given 'permission' to do so by the whole group. At other times the enthusiasm to achieve and be productive and the interest inherent in their collective work makes it possible for individuals to legitimately go off and work separately and not be punished or ignored for doing so. Group two does not easily perform and has not developed routines conducive to sustaining the group and its work. At the end of the collaborative work, this group is still trying to develop its routines. It is still negotiating with itself.

### **Guilt, trust and the community**

Clearly the emotions of the members of these groups play an important part in shaping the work of the groups. Anxiety is present in all the groups to some extent, but is pervasive in group two. The members of this group talk of their "struggle" to collaborate, and at some time or other they all indicate a certain degree of guilt about the way they are interacting and behaving. Their identity does not match up to the implicit and explicit contract of collaborative learning ie to work together through processes of negotiation and participation. The existence of feelings of guilt presupposes people going against norms sanctioned by the group or community (Giddens, 1991). The very presence of guilt therefore suggests the existence of some kind of community.

At times trust is lost in group two between certain individuals. This has the effect of unsettling the group by raising questions about trust generally. Although it is never actually mentioned openly, a reading of the communication transcripts indicates an implicit lack of trust between one particularly strong-minded, and therefore significant, member and the others. Trust is present in the sub-groups, but not across all individuals. Their language and actions are indices of this. In the other two groups, trust does seem to exist across individuals. Members are loyal to each other. They do not abandon decisions made collectively after the event. We have seen that in group two there is a pattern of decisions being made only to be questioned afterwards, or abandoned altogether. To the members of this group, this feels like being betrayed. Groups one and three work hard at developing a sense of trust, and at individuals winning the trust of others in the groups. They are very open about themselves, their interests, worries and concerns. They actively support each other by making every effort to "listen" and respond quickly. They offer to

share the workload. They show commitment to the members of the group and to ensuring that the group sustains itself and carries out its job of production. These are all characteristics of people with a well developed senses of identity (Giddens, 1991). These groups could be characterised as being highly sociable.

In group two, being sociable is openly questioned by the significant member. She says she is not interested in socialising or in getting to know the others. She is only concerned with getting on with the job of producing a collaborative product. This admission has profound effects on the other members of the group, and as we have seen, acts to stop them being productive. At the same time this person says she feels like an outsider, and talks of the group being made up of 'cliques' and being apart from her.

Although liking others, socialising and getting on with them is not always a necessary criterion for successful cooperation (Axelrod, 1990), it does seem that in the context of an adult learning environment such as this, there is a real need for a sense of trust and community. Trust is created by people taking time to listen to each other and to nurture an atmosphere of caring (Giddens, 1991). This helps produce feelings of security within the members of the groups. In trustful situations people are more likely to take risks with their learning, to push themselves and others beyond their present boundaries. This can be highly developmental, as well as more likely to produce useful insights into the groups' learning processes.

## IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Members of communities of practice are likely to belong to multiple communities at the same time. As they experience this multi-membership, they have to work at maintaining their identity across the boundaries (Wenger, 1998, p158). Analysis of the CMC transcripts of e-learning groups shows how this works in these communities. Discussion within the group involves reflection on their practice and critical discussion and analysis of theory and concepts. The meaning discerned from these discussions by each participant is taken out of the group and into each participant's place of professional practice, where it is applied and tested. Focusing on this helps produce "development" in their professional practice (as teacher, lecturer, librarian, consultant or whatever their current practice is).

The insights and knowledge gained from this are then brought back into the ongoing work of the group, where it is used as content for discussion and where it eventually becomes material to be woven into the various products of the group. This is an important facet of the knowledge building-work which takes place in the group. Sometimes participants are aware as they are doing it that they are developing knowledge in this way. Often they are not and it is only when they come to collectively review their work later in the Workshop that they gain some insight into this process. The weaving together of work around theory and practice becomes almost natural as the members of the group examine the literature, discuss it and relate it to their present group work and to their professional practice "back home". It also works in the other direction, where their practice in the group and their practice as professional educators become the catalyst for finding theory to help explain it.

The construction of identity is a central aspect of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). It can be argued that when learning is viewed as social co-participation, the focus is on each individual constructing their identity within the social space of the learning group. This view of identity within learning is one which poses interesting questions about the "hidden" ontology of sociocultural theories of learning:

*Whereas much psychological research treats identity simply as self-concept, as knowledge of self, that is, as epistemological, the sociocultural conception of identity addresses the fluid character of human being and the way identity is closely linked to participation and learning in the community. (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p229).*

This occurs through (amongst other things) processes of social participation (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998): more precisely in this case through processes of collaborative learning. The textual entries to the various synchronous forums and asynchronous chat sessions are written in the knowledge of who the community is. They are written by individuals who "imagine" themselves to be in this virtual community. They are written both as a way of communicating about 'content', processes and other aspects of the group's work, but also as ways of communicating about who they are as individual participants in this community. They reveal the identity of the writer within the community.

The negotiation of identity is a very reflexive thing. We encourage participants to reflect on their group experiences throughout the course, and provide opportunities when they have to formally stand back and review their own and

each other's communications and contributions. This can be a very revealing, challenging and risky thing for them to have to do. Identity – of self and of groups – is something to be creatively worked at in order to be sustained:

*The altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.* (Giddens, 1991, p 33).

**Identity construction:** Within these groups, identity is presented, challenged and re- shaped with respect to:

**themselves as learners:** as learners they are challenged to change their identity as learners by:

- taking responsibility for developing skill in judging the quality of their own and each others work
- identifying as a member of a new (MEd) community of practice
- understanding that assessment is a learning process and not a unilateral process of judgement
- writing for a definite audience ie the community of peers and tutors
- coming to view each other as an important source of expertise and learning
- coming to realise that they can produce knowledge

It also has the effect of changing members' attitude to themselves as a learner and seems to facilitate the taking of responsibility for their own learning.

**their purpose as learners:** within this community they are asked to participate in a variety of activities and events which they do not normally associate with the purpose of learning, such as participating in collaborative assessment processes; tasking some responsibility to help others learn; reflecting on their learning and using that as a source of new learning

**their relationship with tutors:** they are asked to take on some of the traditional responsibilities that they have come to associate with the role of a 'tutor', such as assessing themselves and each other; developing relationships of a qualitatively different kind with their tutor, more akin at times to working with them as a peer than tutor. They are encouraged to talk with tutors as 'friends', to challenge them and their expertise when necessary and to share the power that tutors hold.

**their place in the academic world:** students often have strong conceptions of what it means to be 'academic' and to participate on a post graduate course. They tend to view the academic world as a place where individuals work alone and produce abstract, theoretical products. Some of them aspire to this. Some think it too detached and unrelated to the 'real' world, and therefore do not wish to particularly aspire to it. Being asked to work as a member of a learning community can produce conflict in their self-identity in a number of ways (this is a phenomenon noted by others eg Lave & Wenger, 1991; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), not least in their view of themselves in the academic world. It can cause them to question their views on the meaning of learning and scholarship. This is a source of discussion in the group as they come to identify with the meaning of community and realise that it is possible to study as a community rather than solely as individuals.

**their professional practice:** the boundary between members' work in the group and their professional practice is a major source of change and development, both at a personal and professional level. Group members are challenged to consider their existing practice in the context of their work in the group. They are also challenged to consider their practice as learning members of the group (5). They discuss who they are (implicitly discussing their identity) as professional people (teachers, librarians, lecturers, course designers) and work towards 'developing' their new identity. The work that occurs at the boundary of identity in the two communities can sometimes be highly developmental.

There is a tangible shift during the history of the group from seeing themselves as individual learners to seeing themselves as people learning in a social environment where collaboration and cooperation is expected and rewarded. All of this has affects on each member's identity as they shift from one community to another (6). The ways in which they experience themselves through participation helps them define who they are (Wenger, 1998).

## DISCUSSION

From the above we can see that negotiation in e-learning communities poses certain problems and issues for participants and tutors. In the groups, members are faced with at least two practical issues relating to their work:

- production versus community processes
- structure versus negotiation and openness

Looking back at our history of designing for virtual learning communities I can see a move away from completely open, relatively un-structured practices to ones where we have begun to deliberately design for structured collaborative and cooperative learning.

In the early years of the course we deliberately tried to emulate those community building and sustaining processes which we had been using in face-to-face meetings. These had been largely very open, un-structured processes which attempted to offer opportunities for all members to participate and engage with developing community and in making decisions about the content and design of the course. In these large communities it was possible to “hear” each member’s interests and concerns and attempt come to a collective understanding of the personal and collective needs of the community. We felt this was an important aspect of developing community, where time was given to knowing who the members of the community were. Some of this was carried out in face-to-face sessions and then continued online in the learning sets. Initially we had face-to-face meetings at the beginning of each workshop, followed by the online component, which was the major part of the workshop. As we attempted to make the course more widely available across the globe, we moved to face-to-face sessions only at the beginning year one and year two of the programme. This allowed our overseas participants to attend the meetings prior to each year’s online work, without obliging them to attend too many face-to-face sessions which was obviously a large travel expense for them. To make the course completely accessible to anyone anywhere in the world eventually forced us to abandon all face-to-face meetings, and re-design the entire course for as a completely virtual one. At this point we attempted to design learning events and processes which could support as much of our values and beliefs about openness, negotiation, self management, personal and collective decision making and so on as was possible.

The community develops through discussion and negotiation. With numbers greater than about 7/8 participants and a tutor, this becomes extremely difficult and at times impossible, to achieve. Discussion and negotiation in large community groups (eg of 20-25 which is often the course intake each year) is cumbersome. The amount of information produced in such large communities when everyone is actively participating is extremely large and burdensome. The possibility for diversity of views is great, but the effort required to follow discussions and negotiate from the many different viewpoints is high.

For example, in one of the workshop reviews where we focused on our experiences of the previous workshop and then moved on to forming new learning sets for working in the next Workshop, we attempted to have a very open process in which participants and tutors could start discussion threads on any review topic they wished. The focus was on encouraging diversity of view and opinion. There was a high degree of negotiation leading to an extended period of discussion. We attempted not to be driven by reaching consensus. But for some participants this caused a high degree of frustration. Not everyone participated, and tutors felt obliged to work “behind the scene”, analysing what was happening and trying to make sense of it. The production of views and extremely interesting and innovative ideas about the design of the next Workshop was a great strength of this approach, but the asynchronous communicative process took longer than we had anticipated. We had to at some point attempt to reach some collective view of where we were going and why, but the discussions could have gone on for many additional weeks as participants “listened” to each other, considered each other’s views and then added additional viewpoints. It was clear that as an open-ended discussion process it was working very well, but as a method for coming to some collective view on where we might be going, it proved difficult to handle. As a community we had to close the discussions down, and move onto the next Workshop. Finally the tutors intervened by offering an analysis of the emerging issues and concerns which participants seized on. To the tutors this felt like being forced to have to bring closure too early. It was a solution to an increasingly chaotic and diverging process, yet seemed inappropriate for what we were trying to achieve as it made the tutor the final arbiter, rather than the community.

Early closure is sometimes also seen in the smaller groups where, after extensive asynchronous and synchronous discussion and negotiation on the focus of their collaborative work, members sometimes accept the first “good” proposal offered by one of them in order to get them started on their work. It seems their willingness to negotiate and discuss is tempered by their concerns to forge ahead and get the work done. It seems reaching consensus by

thorough and extensive negotiation is sometimes difficult and too protracted. Balancing that with their feelings about “doing” the collaborative project sometimes leads them to accept the first ‘good’ proposal and which relieves them of the continued need for negotiation.

The question arises: does CMC close down the possibility for negotiation and diversity of opinion in learning communities? The introduction of synchronous CMC has in some ways offered opportunities for the community to come together in small groups to focus on decision making. But even here, on reading some of the transcripts of the chat sessions, consensus making is not easy. That’s partly because the technology of chat rooms is clumsy and discussion processes can be very time consuming when carried out synchronously when the value of ‘hearing’ everyone is a major criterion. Closure is sometimes forced by people having to leave the event. To overcome this, quite often, participants place the transcript in the asynchronous forum so that they can reflect on the chat. They also often summarise the chat outcomes and place these in the forum. They then continue the discussions in the forum itself, sometimes taking part in another chat session to develop their ideas and reach agreement. All of this is, however, very time consuming.

When participants are willing to give time to these processes and negotiations, the outcomes are extremely favourable and the time involved usually provides them with a real sense of engagement and collective identity. Their work together forges a sense of community. Although time consuming, the potential benefits for them developing trustful relationships which in turn will support and foster their collaborative work are enormous. This I think is not always explicitly anticipated by the groups, but in looking at their collective work it is apparent to any outsider. When it does not happen, whether that is by deliberate choice or the circumstances of the social processes of these learning environments, then it is apparent that the members of the groups are less likely to feel engaged with each other or feel that they have been involved in a truly collaborative learning experience.

Does this suggest a trend towards consensus and closure? In the early days of the MEd the course could be characterised as very open; it facilitated huge diversity amongst those involved, was highly engaging and had a high level of negotiation. The price to pay for this was, at times, a huge overload of information.

Now, with the deliberate introduction of formal collaborative and cooperative processes and clear work phases, negotiations are more focused. Discussion is still very high but occurs within well defined time periods after which everyone involved moves onto the next Phase of their work; decisions are sometimes finally made by tutors (with or without clarification); there is perhaps more strategic learning with members of learning sets choosing to address the requirement to produce an end product as a priority over community development and “true” collaborative learning.

*Consequences for the tutor:* although the differences are not always clear cut, it does seem that the movement towards providing more scaffolding has, in my opinion, provided both positive and negative effects:

- the changes could be causing tutors to become slightly more distant and less personally participatory in bringing their own interests and concerns to the community.
- they are more likely to have a presence as an interventionist rather than as a facilitator. They are more likely to ‘step in’ and offer solutions for the set (ie for others) rather than being part of the set and being authentically involved in developing understandings of the set and it’s project and purpose from the perspective of an active member.
- this shift in power relations may signal to participants that the tutor is there to intervene and present closure,

and they may come to expect that from the tutor.

From the perspective of a community of practice, these possible changes in the tutor’s relationship with the members are bound to have consequences. If they are moving towards a relationship which is peripheral, purely diagnostic and outside the actual productive work of the community, then are they likely to be seen by members as outsiders who exert control and unilateral power?

*Consequences for community:* communities of practice require considerable time to develop and sustain themselves. They are often in a constant process of change and flux. They do not deliberately set out to focus on their learning. Learning communities (Pedler, 1981), on the other hand, do focus on learning as a community issue. They are deliberately reflective in their practices, looking at themselves and their learning processes. They are therefore often knowledgeable about themselves and what they are trying to achieve. They are largely self-organising through their formal learning processes. In developing communities in elearning environments, both of these concepts –

communities of practice and learning communities – offer strong conceptual models which help us in the design of spaces and events which focus on the social practice of working together.

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