**Building Communities: Online Education and Social Capital**

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**Introduction**

Recent discussions of the social impact of the Internet have been polarised into two camps. On the one hand, pessimists consider that the application of communications and information technologies to an ever widening range of social, cultural and economic activities (e-commerce, e-learning, etc) is providing yet another dimension for social exclusion. To lack access, for whatever reason, is to be excluded from the burgeoning knowledge society. Technological utopians, on the other hand, consider that the development of C&IT provides the basis for new forms of social inclusion, enabling people to participate in society regardless of temporal, spatial and other physical constraints. From this perspective, the extension of the Internet provides scope for a rise in social capital, “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p.19). Given the extent of investment in C&IT and the salience of social inclusion in the social policies of Western nations, the relative validity of the two views is of considerable significance. The application of C&IT to open and distance education provides a test bed for evaluating their relative salience.

**Social Capital**

Social capital is an umbrella term that appears to have been independently invented a number of times during the twentieth century, most notably by Putnam (1993; 2000), Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988) and Loury (1992). There are close links between the term and a number of other concepts used in the social and policy sciences to describe the state of social organisation or disorganisation, e.g. social cohesion, social inclusion and social integration.

In what has become recognised as the most well-developed exposition of social capital, Putnam focuses on those forms of social capital relating to civic engagement: “people’s connection with the life of their community” (1995b: 665), concentrating on such relationships as membership in neighbourhood associations, choral societies or sport clubs, but also including less formal networks. He notes that

“social capital is closely related to what some have called civic virtue. The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (2000, p.19).

The consequences of low social capital for health and welfare are legion. At an individual level, social connectedness has been shown to be an important determinant of economic success (Loury, 1992) and of physical and psychological well-being (House et al., 1988; Seeman, 1996). Wilkinson (1996: 5) notes that

“People with more social contacts and more involvement in local activities seem to have better health, even after controlling for a number of other possibly confounding factors.”
At a community level, low social capital - often translated as social disorganization - has been implicated in a variety of social problems, including high rates of crime (Sampson & Groves 1989; Sampson & Moreonoff, 1997), child abuse (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980), developmental difficulties among adolescents (Furstenberg & Hurst, 1995) and poverty (Thomas et al., 1998). The relationship between social disorganization in local communities and higher rates of deviant and aberrant behaviour was one of the major findings of researchers belonging to the Chicago tradition of human ecology. Kornhauser (1978, p. 63) noted the concentration of deviant behaviour in socially disorganised districts: communities “that cannot supply a structure through which common values can be realised and common problems solved.” More recently, the connection between high social capital and positive behavioural and social outcomes has become part of the communitarian agenda developed by Etzioni (1998) and enthusiastically taken up by “third way” politicians on both sides of the Atlantic.

Social capital is concerned with connections between individuals and wider groups. In order to analyse the extent of social capital or to examine its effects, it is important to consider the social context involved. Individuals may well be integrated into their immediate community yet isolated from the wider society. People in marginalised and stigmatised communities may feel discriminated against and excluded from the wider society and may, in turn, disengage (Foundations, 1999). Castells (1998) warns of the danger of a "new tribalism" in network society. Putnam (2000, p.21 - 22) points out that

“Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive...It is important to ask how the positive consequences - mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional efficiency - can be maximized and the negative manifestations - sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption - minimized.”

Strong social capital within a group can lead to the exclusion of outsiders. In addition, dense, closely-knit social groups can create pressures for conformity among members that restrict freedom and may make it difficult for them to gain access to resources and information that are available elsewhere (Portes & Landholt, 1995). Inner-city gangs can be seen as an attempt by members of an excluded group to develop a high degree of internal social capital through an emphasis on exclusivity and internal bonding. To avoid fragmentation, bridges between groups are an essential element in social cohesion, knitting groups together. This is a task which online or networked learning seems well designed to undertake.

Social Capital and Computer Networks

The relationship between the use of electronic networks and social interaction in the “real” world has been the subject of considerable argument, but remarkably little empirical study. Wellman and Gulia (1999) point out that the area is dominated by anecdotes, assumptions and prejudices rather than empirical research.

Critics of the social implications of C&IT believe that computer-mediated communication (CMC) may replace face-to-face contact between people with less-satisfactory “virtual” interaction, which will lead to further isolation and the atomisation of society. Stoll (1995:58) claims that “computer networks isolate us from one another, rather than bringing us together”, pointing to the danger that “by logging on the networks we lose the ability to enter into spontaneous interactions with real people.” According to McClelland (1994:10):
“Rather than providing a replacement for the crumbling public realm, virtual communities are actually contributing to its decline. They’re another thing keeping people indoors and off the streets. Just as TV produces couch potatoes, so on-line culture creates mouse potatoes, people who hide from real life and spend their whole life goofing off in cyberspace.”

Despite the strength of the views expressed by the critics their concern that the use of CMC will lead to a decline in face-to-face relationships has found little support in empirical studies. Instead, a number of researchers (e.g. Beamish, 1995; Hamman, 1998) report that the use of C&IT serves as a complement to face-to-face interaction, rather than a substitute. Other writers suggest that relationships formed in cyberspace may, in any case, be just as emotionally-charged as ones based on physical presence and may have similarly significant implications for identity and community.

The on-line community is often referred to as a “virtual community”, a term popularised by Rheingold in his book of the same name. Rheingold (1993, p.5) offers this definition:

“Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

Describing the experience of participating in one of the earliest on-line communities, the WELL, Rheingold (1993:3) notes

“People in virtual communities...exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friend and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can’t kiss anybody and nobody can punch you on the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries.”

Wellman (1997, p.179) points out that “When a computer network connects people, it is a social network”. Hawthornthwaite et al (1998, p. 213) note that “Virtual communities extend the possibilities for community; just as CMC extends possibilities for interaction.” Blanchard and Horan (1998) suggest that virtual communities provide the basis for new forms of social capital.

An on-line community, like one grounded off-line, is held together by the feelings of togetherness and connectedness that confer a sense of belonging (Foster, 1997). Such feelings do not ‘just happen’. In a speech delivered as part of the BBC Online Community Day (17 June 1999), Rheingold (1999) points out:

“In order to succeed, a virtual community has to have an affinity – the answer to the question ‘what would draw these people together?’”

In order to form a community, “virtual” or “real”, participants need to share a common purpose: it is in this connection that the use of the Internet for online education may be especially relevant.

Kollock (1998), while noting that “There is no algorithm for community”, suggests a number of guidelines for the development of on-line communities that are derived from work on inter-personal co-operation and social dilemmas. Among the points mentioned are the importance of individuals sharing information about each other, ensuring continuity of interaction, allowing
sufficient time for people to express themselves, sharing interests and having self-administered rules and sanctions. All of these are characteristics shared by a learning community.

Online Learning Communities and Social Capital

In an attempt to explore the potential of the Internet for the development of learning communities, an online module, “Community Portraits”, was trialled in 1999. The module was designed as part of Project SCHEMA (Social Cohesion through Higher Education in Marginal Areas), funded by the EC Educational Multimedia Taskforce. Community Portraits was initially directed at the continuing professional development needs of health and welfare workers in geographically remote areas of Scotland, Finland and Germany. A collaborative approach to learning was adopted, based on the view that successful health and welfare practice involves both knowledge of the community context and a willingness to collaborate across professional specialisms.

Participants in the trial run consisted of nine health and welfare workers, four in Finland, three in Germany and two in Scotland. Three groups were established, each containing a mix of nationalities and professions. During the course of spring 1999 (February-June) the participants met online, developed work-plan, produced and exchanged community portraits and discussed the process of collaboration. The project took longer than anticipated, mainly as the result of minor technical difficulties. Many of these related to what had been intended to be a minor aspect of the learning environment – a chat facility. The course tutor noted

“Reflecting on the difficulties encountered in fostering collaborative working relationships in Community Portraits, insight from comparison with face-to-face experience may be useful. Participants in Community Portraits have made much of their problems with Chat buttons and I have noted ... the link between this and the importance of trivia in the development of effective collaborative relationships. To be more accurate, if we are to know how best to promote effective collaborative relationships, we may need to switch attention from issues of principle such as shared purpose and task definition to the more humble contextual aspects of good social relationships: irrelevant exchanges, humour, eating and drinking together, etc. Some of these are not so easy to provide online and some (such as humour and irrelevance) may seem to usurp task time online. Legitimating such interchanges may be an important role for the tutor”

Although the common experience of technical problems led to delays in the planned timetable, it had the beneficial effect of uniting participants in a desire to overcome obstacles. Kollock (1998) suggests that some risk may be useful in the development of a learning community:

“without risk online communities will be dull and will not provide the possibility for the development of high levels of trust”

Within a learning community, risks and crises can arise from built-in tasks, from internal disagreements and from such external factors as assessment. The temptation to ensure harmony at all costs is to be avoided. Learning involves confrontation between alternative perspectives and experiences and space has to be allowed for participants to discover these and work through differences. In the quote given earlier, seems to have been stimulus to the development of trust.

The core task of Community Portraits required participants to make comparisons within a collaborative process. The main comparisons were of communities, but important subsidiary
comparisons relating to self and others were also expected. Observation of the early online exchanges suggested that a disproportionate effort was put into identifying similarities rather than differences. It appeared that similarity was being pursued in order to avoid potential disagreement as a way of easing harmonious communication. To some extent this probably reflects cultural patterns of politeness, but it has the effect of denying differences which may be significant.

In this instance it was easy for the course tutor to suggest that attention to differences rather than similarities between communities might yield more interesting discussion. More sensitive, in a general sense, is the need for recognition of interpersonal differences and for participants in collaboration to respond to these differences. Responding to one another as similar beings is to encourage relationships that are based only on the features of the other that each person recognises in herself: in effect a denial of individual identity. Rigid adherence to external rules of polite social engagement has a similar impact. Where collaborative tasks are involved, an emphasis on politeness and a denial of difference runs the risk of missing the range of contributions offered by exploration of differences. The importance of differences lies not simply in the fact of their existence, but in the opportunities they create for personal authenticity in interpersonal relationships, maximising individual initiative, multiplying ideas and offering a richer platform for further development of the interpersonal/collaborative relationship.

Despite technical teething problems and the long time it took for the online groups to get down to productive engagement, the trial run of Community Portraits suggested that the approach was worth pursuing (Timms 1999a & b). The experience of participating in online collaboration did lead to the development of a learning community among professional workers across disciplines and countries and to an increased awareness of the context in which practice took place.

It was always part of the approach used by SCHEMA that forms of learning focussing on online collaboration could provide the basis for developing a sense of community among non-professionals as well as professional workers. Online collaboration has the potential for building community among all participants. In spring 2001 a version of Community Portraits is being run as a means of connecting groups of lone parents and senior citizens living in peripheral housing estates in Stockholm and Glasgow. Both areas have been subjected to adverse coverage in the media and analysis of a survey administrated in one of the communities involved suggests a relatively low level of social capital (Ferlander & Timms 2001).

At the time of writing the groups have been online for less than a month. They continue to exhibit a high degree of optimism and enthusiasm about the potential impact of online collaboration. Coming together to take part in the project has already led to the development of links between previously disparate segments of the population. It is anticipated that the development of learning communities, based on online collaboration in the production of community portraits, will provide a way of bridging gaps between groups and enhancing both networks and trust. Ongoing research is addressing such questions as whether participation online leads to more participation in the community or further fragmentation and isolation? More generally, what role can online learning communities play in helping to bridge barriers between local communities and the rest of society? To the extent that the answers to these questions turn out to be positive it will appear that online learning may be able to play a vital role in the (re-) creation of social capital.
References


*Political Science and Politics, 28*: 664-683.


