

LEARNING AND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Learning is in some sense or senses a communal activity, even if not necessarily a face to face one. But in what sense? There is no agreement about this. This paper briefly surveys the ways in which other people may help learning. It draws particular attention to issues that conflict with simplistic assumptions about freedom, privacy and sociability in relation to learning.

INTRODUCTION

A perennial student complaint is "nobody knows my name or who I am". This seems to voice a need for social community in institutional learning. Yet learning is in some other sense already inherently communal or social: almost all we learn in formal education comes not from our own experience of the world but from others. Yet again, peer interaction is increasingly seen as important to promote in HE (higher education). Partly this is to save staff time and so money; but in fact it is for deeper and longer-standing reasons: peers, it is argued, support learning in ways staff cannot. Thus implicitly there are quite different views of what the important "social" aspect of learning is, quite different visions of how community matters in learning. One is Vygotsky's and Lave's: you need to learn personally from experts, like apprentices from masters. Another vision is Newman's and Illich's: the best learning is from interaction with equals. The educational literature is full of such voices, but they mostly act as if deaf to each other. What is the space of educational forces here, and are they inherently contradictory or is there the possibility of synthesis? What does learning have to do with community, the academic with the social?

CONFLICTING USAGES OF THE PHRASE "LEARNING COMMUNITY"

The phrase "learning community" is now widely used in the educational literature, but this conceals a lack of common conceptual ground. Many authors fail to define what they mean, write as if unaware that other authors use it to mean other things, and that their use of the term is also different from its current normal meaning outside the educational literature. This is reminiscent of a common technique used by communities, e.g. teenage gangs, to differentiate themselves from other groups by coining special usages of various terms, which they prefer that others do not understand. Most educational usages of "community" refer only to positive and helpful aspects of community and do not discuss the unhelpful and divisive aspects — which ironically they seem to be practising themselves.

There may be four main roots to the multiple usage. In the literature dealing with HE (higher education), possibly the single largest use of the term refers to active interventions to increase first year student-student interaction in ways relevant to learning. This approach was introduced in 1984 at Evergreen State College. It may identify sets of students with the most overlap in course enrolments, and may coordinate their work e.g. in an "integrative seminar". The idea explicitly behind it is creating shared intellectual experience with student's new peers (e.g. Alexander, Penberthy, McIntosh, & Denton; 1996).

A second usage for the phrase may originate with Brown & Campione (1990), who used "community of learners" and "learning community". They saw a link between Lave's ideas of situated learning and apprenticeship, and new possibilities in formal classrooms which they were developing. In their work, learners produced learning materials themselves, and taught other students the subject matter (biology) in a community of equals; but acquired learning skills by apprenticeship from teachers who were not subject experts but did model learning skills. Few of those who now use the phrase are referring to anything like such a rich mix of features; yet Brown herself was certainly not alluding to the full range of ways in which community relates to learning.

The third root is simply the vast range of possible meanings arising from the way we can all find relevant associations between "learning" and "community". This makes the phrase continually attractive to its many different users, yet also makes it hard to share precise meaning. Some authors simply use "learning community" as a catchphrase for any set of learners: they might just as well say "the students on the course". While the false presupposition of a common meaning is annoying in the scholarly literature, the great range of associations is also an opportunity to uncover some puzzles that may eventually allow us to improve practice.

We begin by noting that in current UK usage (e.g. in newspapers), "community" refers to people who live near each other e.g. in a town, and are organised together by law, government, and shared services. They therefore have significant interests and activities in common, but usually have not chosen the other members and frequently have little or no personal relationship with each other. A university is like this too. However most usages of "community" in the educational literature deny the negative, presuppose the positive, and in fact refer to interventions to increase inter-personal interaction, which is not inherent in the concept and reality of community. The contrast comes out in phrases such as "care in the community" which now in the UK refers to mentally ill people being required to live outside institutions, sometimes in the face of protests by "the community" itself.

The fourth major root of the term "learning community" is its long established use in the literature on Adult Education, where it is used to discuss the relationship between learning, groups of learners, and their surrounding community. Similarly it has been used to refer to how a school relates to the community around it e.g. DfEE (1999). Even within this usage there are several distinct ideas:

- One is for groups of schools that form a supply chain e.g. a secondary school and all the primary schools that feed into it. By forming a community, these can improve things such as whether children acquire the knowledge needed for a smooth transition between them.
- Home culture: thought to be the reason that in the USA, Asian American children outperform Anglo Americans who outperform African Americans. That is, success at school is strongly affected by how the culture or attitudes of the home interact with it.
- Coordination of activities in and out of schools within a community by families, schools, and out of school activities; i.e. the coordination of formal and informal learning. A stronger version of this is that some academic

subjects in fact tacitly assume that the child does thousands of hours of related practical work as a hobby. Thus a child who reads several books a week as leisure is obviously likely to outperform in English a child who never reads except at school; a boy who spends time building and mending electrical and mechanical devices will have a far better grounding for science and engineering than a child who thinks these are to be studied only in school. This emerged, among other places, in a study of why so few women used to get and keep places in computer science at Carnegie Mellon: it was not that the women were stupid or lazy, but the men just took for granted working extremely long hours at it "for fun" and had done so for years before they got to university: this gave them a grounding which many of the courses took for granted, but that merely excellent students did not have (Margolis & Fisher, 2002).

Illich's (1970) book "Deschooling society" argued for an education system without teachers: learners would find others with (for the moment) the same learning objective, and learn with them: a system wholly peer, not teacher, based. Cardinal Newman (1852) too has some remarks about how peers are more important than "exams and professors" for true education, although he thought academics who cared about tutoring would be even better. They didn't use the phrase "learning community", but represent the idea that learning is, or should be, fundamentally about peers learning together. (This is arguably the most natural, and deepest, use of the term: not a community with some learning round its edges, but a community formed entirely for the purpose of learning.)

Another usage of "learning community" in the current educational literature turns out to refer not to students but to small groups of HE teachers meeting, say, once a month for discussion about each other's personal research projects on teaching. These should perhaps be called "teaching communities" rather than "learning communities" (Macdonald, 2001), or "Disciplinary Commons" (Tenenbergs & Fincher, 2007). On the other hand, they are about peer learning, and how peers stimulate personal reflection, and share good practice: clearly good for promoting professionalism.

Newman also emphasises the importance of academics forming a cross-discipline community (again without using that word; today we over-use "collegiality" to express the thought): the importance of respecting what others know as a corrective to assuming that anyone who thinks differently from us is wrong and is stupid to be wrong. Thus he thinks fundamental to a university is that it includes scholars of **all** types of knowledge together in order that this fundamental feature of peer interaction is provided for the academics themselves.

Jean Lave (1991) developed the concept of "communities of practice", conceived of as the locus of learning analogous to apprenticeship: the communities here are defined by "practice" or activity, with learning occurring by joining in the activity of more experienced practitioners. Wenger (1998) wrote further on "communities of practice" and related the concept to "learning communities". This seems, although from a very different disciplinary starting point, at bottom the same general view as that of Vygotsky, in that learning is seen as essentially social, but as not primarily between peers but between more and less

knowledgeable people, e.g. teacher and pupil. One of the relatively rare cases of applying that in HE for/to students is described in Dunlap (2006). It is a good fit there, since this was a course for turning graduates into researchers, able to participate in that community.

Social constructivism also sees learning as bound to communities. However many quite different ways in which one person may influence another's learning for the better have already been identified. A general belief that communities matter to learning doesn't say which of these ways do not matter and which do matter, and how, and why; and so is little help for the practical business of improving teaching and learning or for the theoretical business of specifying how exactly community affects learning. The next section discusses a way in which it does matter, but which contradicts some common intuitions.

TEACHER MONITORING

One aspect of "community" is currently coming to prominence in the movement to break up secondary schools into smaller units of about 350 pupils, rather than over 1,000 (Wetz, 2006). The idea is that, although the majority of pupils do well in huge schools with different teachers for each subject, disaffection and failure rates are heavily influenced by whether there is a staff member who effectively monitors each pupil's work as a whole and knows both pupil and their family well. Chinese schools do this; it is a growing movement in the USA; some are calling for it in the UK. It may not be about tutoring on the subject matter itself, but about a) whether the child feels part of a community, noticed; b) whether their work is monitored so that even if they express difficulties only by not doing things, rather than by asking for help, this is quickly responded to.

There are a series of important issues here. Does "community" really mean teacher-pupil not peers? Students complain if no teacher knows their name, and really value it when they do; and this appears to be independent of whether they have good friends in the class.

Do staff have two tasks, best thought of as quite separate rather than assuming that doing one will cover the other automatically? The successful schools aren't merely smaller, but rather they ensure that for each child there is one teacher looking out for them across all subjects i.e. a separation of the functions of specialist content teaching and of monitoring each pupil's work as a whole. This latter function involves: a) monitoring each pupil's attendance of school and each class; b) monitoring their work e.g. are they completing their homework in all their subjects; c) knowing their family. In many ways this may simply be reinstating a function that teachers in the UK too used to make a point of doing, but now have "forgotten": being a "home room" teacher. Apparently in China, secondary school classes are 50 (not 30) BUT they have strongly in place one teacher keeping an eye on all of each pupil's work independently of specialist subject teachers. This issue seems to be about a feeling of community, of entrainment, of being noticed, of support when needed.

But is it about "caring" or is it really "monitoring"? It may actually be more about "being known" or being noticed than being loved. And perhaps we all have a need to have our actions noticed and taken as a gesture even when we don't, and don't feel able to, start a conversation ourselves. Certainly, we probably don't want to be where no-one notices we are angry unless we say "Hey, I'm

angry”, or that we are deeply upset unless we say “Hey, these are tears, I need help here”. Babies would probably live only a few days in such circumstances, but adults too are not entirely free, not just from a wish but from the need to be noticed without asking for it.

Perhaps it is not exactly being known, or noticed, or monitored, but more being recognised. This is one view of a doctor’s (or a shaman’s) role: not to cure, but to recognise the disease, the person and the situation they are in, even if no worthwhile intervention can be made. For all modern medicine’s emphasis on cure, we are still all fated to die. A far older, yet still entirely contemporary, role for doctors is to recognise and certify this (Berger, 1968/1997). This is really the same point as is made in quite other contexts about how the most important feature of personal relationships is not validation, praise etc. so much as being known as we really are (Ben-Shahar, 2007).

This function (“monitoring”) seems similar to the principle of “time on task” and Gibbs’ version of that as a principle of assessment design (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Here however it is not about designing the course, but monitoring student execution of the design so as to detect promptly those who are falling away. It rings bells with discussion in HE about addressing first year and retention issues there. It is interesting that the discussion about secondary schools, though using different language, is also about supporting the transition from primary school, about requiring pupils to be more self-managing but catching early those who have difficulty with this and focussing staff support there. In effect this is about scaffolding, not the learning of the content, but the increase in self-regulation required: and to progressively withdraw that scaffolding, but “contingently” i.e. only for those pupils who can now manage.

Thus what I’ve called “teacher monitoring” seems to be important, especially in addressing dropout and retention. But what view does it imply about “learning community”?

- It is about community in that the learners talk about whether anyone knows them, notices them; whether they feel part of it.
- It is not about peers but about relationships with teachers/staff.
- It is not about teaching content e.g. tutoring a learner through some difficulty of understanding.
- It is not even about managing content or acquisition i.e. about whether the learner has “got” some concept, or passed some test.
- It is not properly pastoral in the sense of solving their personal problems, or offering them counselling, although awareness of these things may be part of it. It is about helping them work round any personal problems so as to remain productively engaged in learning.
- It is about learning activity “management”: about whether the learner is engaging in the learning activities. (Attendance is simply the crudest measure related to this.) Students mostly learn to become good at this over their time at university, but are often not good at it at first. They need, and often know they need, some help with this: some scaffolding. This management or self-regulation issue is what is addressed by Gibbs’ principles. Teacher monitoring is one way it is addressed elsewhere in the education system, and perhaps should be considered in first year in HE, although the important aim of equipping learners to be more autonomous

and ready for lifelong learning means that this scaffolding should be progressively withdrawn.

Thus teacher monitoring could be understood as addressing a need for personal communication that does not presuppose student proactiveness but does embody a personal knowledge of the student as a whole (not as half a dozen unrelated course enrolments), and addresses the complaint “nobody knows my name or who I am”; but which contravenes intuitions about privacy, student autonomy, responsibility, and freedom. This is also a matter of making students accountable: which is recognisably a core function of community, but not one that most of the current users of “learning community” care to own.

LEARNERS BEING ACCOUNTABLE

I called the issue “teacher monitoring” to emphasise a contrast between it and connotations of non-judgemental support. That terminology also emphasises a perspective in which the teacher is active but the learner passive. It is however possible to think of this in terms of a much more active learner: in terms of the learner being visible, accountable, and so active. Shulman (2005), in discussing his notion of signature pedagogies, does this. His discussion explicitly comments on how students in these particular pedagogic situations cannot hide, are fully “visible” and “accountable”; and how they may well find this terrifying at first, but with familiarity, terror normally reduces to a productive anxiety: again, this stresses a difference from an unchallenging approach. The characteristics of signature pedagogies that he lists are:

- Pervasive, routine, habitual. So learners are completely used to what is required in these sessions, and can concentrate on what is being taught and learned. I.e. there are standard rules of engagement for these learning activities NOT novelty in the format.
- Students feel highly visible, accountable, and vulnerable.
- Students feel deeply engaged.
- High affective level in class.

The relevant characteristic here is being accountable. This could be seen as an extension of teacher monitoring: but where the learner is more autonomous, less dependent on a teacher taking special pains to monitor them, more self-monitoring. This suggests that where learning and teaching not only offer but demand and enforce engagement and participation from the learners, then they may fulfil implicit requirements that lead to improved retention. Feeling highly accountable, then, is the proactive learner counterpart of teacher monitoring. An intermediate case, perhaps, is mentoring: again it is advice on a learner’s process (not on the content they are learning), and from someone more knowledgeable yet not in authority.

THE DIVERSE WAYS OTHER PEOPLE CAN HELP INDIVIDUALS LEARN

There is a large number of ways in which others can help us learn. However two big questions are a) is it teachers or peers who are important for this? and b) does a **feeling** of community matter? There are unintentional and impersonal ways that others advance our learning (you overhear something that sticks in your mind and makes you think; Shakespeare wasn’t writing for me personally, probably couldn’t even imagine someone like me); and then there are things that make you feel part of a community.

A generic and abstract meaning of “community” is the way learning is often, perhaps always, promoted by interaction with other people around learning; that is, the social aspects as opposed to the individualistic cognitive aspects of learning. It’s mysterious as a whole because, as constructivism rightly emphasises, there is an important sense in which learning is essentially private, something each learner does internally for themselves, and that no-one else can directly do for them. On the other hand, it seems clear that teachers have an enormous effect on learning: children who stay away from school seldom learn much unless their parents devote themselves to teaching them. So the general question is, what is it that people do for learners that makes a big difference?

Another important issue here is how intentionally cooperative these ways of helping are. In any community, in many ways the members are indifferent to each other, in some ways they are in conflict or competition, but in some other ways they are importantly inter-dependent. Learning is certainly like that too. Learning is at bottom a private affair internal to the learner’s mind, that no-one else can possibly do for the learner: it is **not** like building a house where labour can be divided. However other people can make a big difference, although whether they intend to varies. When two students revise together by taking turns in devising test questions that the other must try to answer, they put in equal work and end up learning similar content. When two people discuss a concept, they certainly put in similar time and effort, but the research evidence (Miyake, 1986; Howe, Tolmie, & Rogers, 1992) shows they typically take away rather different understandings even though both benefit a lot. This means the previously more advanced learner learns from the process even though the other “had” nothing to teach them. When you look up an entry in Wikipedia, or see how much work another student has done, or which books they have taken out of the library, you benefit even though they didn’t intend that you personally would benefit, nor have you in any way helped them. But we can say that you have benefited from community.

The important ways in which other people can help learning may be categorised in three ways by: whether the help is **intentional** or not, whether the provider has a personal relationship with the learner or not in the specific sense of the provider adjusting what they do in response to the learner i.e. whether it is **contingent**, and by whether it is **reciprocal** i.e. the interaction has approximately equal learning benefits for both or not (peer vs. teacher). These three binary categories in reality have intermediate or mixed instances as well, but the main point here is to illustrate how extensively other people may be important to learning even though unintentionally, with no special expertise, or no special relationship with the learner. The table below shows examples for all eight of the combinations of these three categories. Additionally, “+” marks a fourth binary categorisation of whether the learner is proactive, taking the initiative in organising or arranging for the activity. A fifth binary categorisation, not systematically marked and developed here but implicitly varying among the examples, is between help at the basic content level of concepts to be learned, and help with the management level of deciding on what learning activities to perform.

Learners benefit from others with and without special expertise, intention, or being personally known + indicates an activity initiated by the learner (proactive-ness)			
Helper's expertise	Intention to teach	Personal relationship (contingent action)	Not personal
Unequal, staff, benefit not reciprocal	Intended	Teacher monitoring, Scaffolding of procedural skills + Ask a tutor	Lecturing, Writing a textbook, + Asking an expert
	Unintended	Role model (using a teacher as), (+) Imitating or observing someone more knowledgeable whom you know	+ Eavesdropping on strangers, Using a celebrity or hero as a role model, + Studying the career of a politician to gain similar success
Equal, peer, reciprocal benefit	Intended	+ Alternating roles e.g. testing each other, student reciprocal critiquing, The same but imposed by staff	Wikipedia, Anonymised versions of student reciprocal critiquing, + Posting a question to a forum
	Unintended	Peer discussion, + Borrowing lecture notes, + Spying on, imitating, or observing a classmate you know	Anonymous peer review, + Comparing your marks or actions to the class norm, + Listening to classmates' questions and comments, + Mutual help with the process e.g. ask where the classroom is.

LEARNING REGARDLESS OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The table above illustrates that many of the ways in which others assist learning do **not** involve a personal relationship in the specific sense of the teacher adjusting what they do in response to the learner. Since the invention of writing, it has been unnecessary for the teacher to know the learner in any way. Although a letter writer often adjusts what they say to a specific reader, and some authors talk of "knowing their audience", it is impossible to say that Shakespeare or Newton changed what they wrote from knowledge of me. Similarly for every type of peer interaction, there are ways for a learner to benefit both with and without the other intending or even knowing about them.

The underlying issue here is what is the relationship of the social and the academic — of Tinto's (1975) two types of integration thought to be important in reducing dropout — of personal social relationships and productive learning? A personal relationship is founded on knowing specific things about the other, and

most importantly, the history of the interactions. If you act identically with a person, regardless of anything they do or say, it cannot be a personal relationship. This is "contingency": the dependence of one party's action on the other's previous action(s). This has also been shown to be important in some teaching: Wood, Wood, & Middleton (1978) showed that optimal tutoring on a procedural task was "contingent tutoring", where the tutor's next intervention was varied depending on the last action by the learner. However this isn't the only (nor the most common) way in which one person can help another's learning; and furthermore, their strategy doesn't depend on prior knowledge of the learner, but on responding to what they are doing currently.

Much of this runs counter to the intuition which many learners and teachers have, that the social precedes the academic, and that to get a group or class to work together, they must first be introduced socially (by "ice breakers" in the small scale, cheese and wine events for large classes, etc.). This is widely accepted advice in e-learning e.g. Salmon's (2000) stage 2. However as the review by Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems (2003) reveals (perhaps inadvertently), while the e-learning field believes "that social interaction is a prerequisite for collaboration and collaborative learning", such advice is only an advance relative to "taking social interaction for granted" i.e. to technologists' naive surprise that simply providing the technology (e.g. a discussion board) is not sufficient to induce academically productive peer discussion. It is better than doing nothing, but not only is there no evidence that it is optimal, but it is not even as advanced as best non-technological practice. For example a long established, although not widespread, practice is the reading party, where a group of learners and staff spend several days together engaged in joint academic tasks. These are frequently mentioned as their best learning experience by students who have participated in one, and also produce strong group bonding.

This should be no surprise since the social psychology literature on group functioning has long established that the causality predominantly goes in the contrary direction. Not only is social attractiveness (the bond between group members) independent of personal attractiveness (the bond between two individuals outside any group context), but the need to collaborate on a task creates group cohesiveness even when this means reversing strong prior hostility, as Sherif's experiments and theory of Realistic Conflict established. (See for example the textbook by Hogg & Vaughan, 2008.) This implies that the best way to get a group of learners to bond is to give them a joint task. In other words for learning, the academic precedes the social. This makes sense of quite common student complaints about ice-breaker activities as wasting their time (after all, students' purpose is to learn, not to pay universities to help them with their social life), and more importantly of Trotter's (2006) study of two courses with contrasting dropout rates. One course provided a social activity at the start and had a high dropout rate; the other did not, but did start the course with group projects (which gave the students a directly relevant activity while "incidentally" interacting with each other) and had a low dropout rate.

It seems likely, then, that a more careful consideration of the literatures relevant to learning and community could yield better suggestions about supporting academically productive peer interaction. Certainly Baxter (2007) obtained impressive learning gains based on online "virtual" student groups where there was no provision for meeting face to face nor for prior small group social

interaction, but had repeated joint group projects which led to considerable and useful peer interaction.

Furthermore, the literature on conceptual learning through peer interaction shows that there is no special need for prior social bonds, but on the contrary there is a need to arrange for both a difference in opinion and public statements of that difference to counteract the tendency for groups to agree verbally regardless of their actual private opinions (Howe, Tolmie, & Rogers, 1992). Here the social need not precede the academic, and even tends to obstruct it. This may be why so often student study groups assembled on a basis of prior friendship seem to be less productive than those formed for strictly academic purposes.

More generally, besides reconsidering our teaching practices to take community more seriously, perhaps the most important attribute for a graduate to acquire is a realisation that our learning can be enhanced by people that we don't know or even that we don't like: that the social and the academic are not bound together in any simple way, and that the lifelong learner is not dependent on personal relationships. This readies a graduate both for workplace group working and for learning with peers through the realisation that both parties benefit and no altruism or loyalty is required (although it is often engendered).

"COMMUNITY" AGAIN

Communities, therefore, matter to learning in several separate ways.

- Learning is better promoted (more learning outcomes are realised) if pre-existing communities support it: families, cultural attitudes, governments.
- Other people help learners in many ways, not all personal, not all intentional. A learner without access to other people would be handicapped, although by no means entirely prevented from learning. Thus there are some other positive community effects on learning, even without supportive attitudes.
- Groups ("communities") specially formed for learning are also important, although not essential. Learning in a group (others doing the same course) inside an organisation like a university, increases the availability of resources including social resources, that promote your personal learning.
- Knowledge itself is socially distributed, and not individually and independently grounded. This social network could be called a community, although of a different kind. If we consider a topic as simple as what does something weigh, then what we want to mean is whatever the government standard of weight is; which in turn depends on international standards, and in turn these are under review by experts (who are currently seeking to replace the standard kilogram lump of metal by another way of defining the standard). This paper itself also illustrates how meaning is a series of pointers to other meanings, not something anyone "owns" or "has". When we teach something, even if merely by inducing rote learning of technical terms, we are connecting our learners better to a community of users of the technical terms. Modern practices of creating special online forums around a topic illustrate that communities of practitioners benefit from exercising this social aspect of distributed knowledge. These are much more flexible than traditional communities, and much closer to instantiating Illich's vision.

- But possibly the most powerful effects of community on learning are not at this “object level” of what is meant or known; but at the “meta level” or “management level” of how learning activities are regulated. Learning in a group, to a common timescale, is widely felt to be important, even necessary. It is notable that the Open University, in other respects offering the most freedom to the learner to choose the time and place of the learning work they do, nevertheless imposes deadlines and timescales that keep sometimes gigantic cohorts of students in synchrony.

CONCLUSION

What should a practical teacher or course designer take from this? What is **not** a good idea is to take “learning community” as new knowledgeable-sounding jargon for “a cohort of students”, plus a cosy view of them as “a community”. This is neither warranted nor likely to improve learning. Rather than rely on one’s own feelings of benevolence as a guide to what community means for learning, it seems best to recognise that “community” is a phrase that fits numerous distinct issues in learning. They have been researched separately and should probably be regarded as separate phenomena or issues. This is not to say that the different issues don’t interact, and in practice may have synergistic effects. On the contrary, really successful learning designs typically will succeed in addressing all these issues well in an integrated way that makes them look apparently part of each other. However it does mean that acting to achieve one issue does **not** mean you are bound, or even likely, to achieve all. They are **not** interchangeable. Less inspired learning designs act on some important issues yet fail to cover them all. This applies also to Tinto’s notion of “integration”: both “community” and “integration” allude to a feeling of belonging, and to a relationship between social and academic aspects; but both in fact have many different, and in some cases opposing, interpretations.

Learning **is** social, but not only in the ways we might prefer, or that our favourite theory notices. Three independent dimensions were proposed as a way of mapping out the diverse ways in which other people may assist learning: whether the help is **intentional**, whether it is **contingent** (modified by personalised reaction to the learner), whether it is **reciprocal** (based on a relationship as peers, not as expert-novice). Learning may be aided by other people with and without each of these: in all eight combinations, all of which relate to real communities in the everyday, social sense in some way. However it may be that underlying this three dimensional scheme is a profound contrast between whether what is being learned is procedural or propositional. Both may be assisted by community, but the social organisation of that help is different. If you are learning a procedure (e.g. cooking a recipe, writing a computer program) then a single failure usually causes the failure of the whole process. Situated learning, communities of practice, apprenticeship, and scaffolding are all organised around doing: around performing, learning, and reproducing procedures. In contrast if you are trying to understand a concept, you are exploring the ways it links to other things (that is one definition of deep learning), but no one link is vital. Discussion is productive for testing and creating such links, but agreement is not necessary, nor reproduction of others’ beliefs about it. For this, collegiate interaction is what is required and mutually beneficial, not group work producing a joint product.

The idea and practice I called "teacher monitoring" raises another point: that the aspects of community that have a positive effect on learning may not be about being accepting, or respecting privacy and individual choice. Just as real communities are by no means uniformly benign, and perhaps could never be if they are to maintain cohesion and discipline, so learning communities are not entertainment services, whose only purpose is to give pleasure, comfort and a feeling of consumer control. The ways in which learners are aided by other people are extremely diverse, and uncritical acceptance and lack of challenge are not always best for learning.

"If you travel with us you will have to learn things you do not want to learn in ways you do not want to learn".

[from a letter by Doris Lessing, replying to a reader who had been seriously disturbed by reading one of her novels. Quoted in Alan Yentob's "Imagine" TV programme on Doris Lessing, broadcast Tues 27 May 2008, 10:35pm on BBC1]

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