



# Learning in virtual communities: perspectives in the field of sociological and pedagogical research

Angela Spinelli<sup>1</sup>, Andrea Volterrani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Scuola Istruzione a Distanza - Università di Roma Tor Vergata

<sup>2</sup>Università di Roma Tor Vergata

spinelli@scuolaiad.it, andrea.volterrani@uniroma2.it

**Keywords:** Virtual community, Assessment, Social capital, Bonding, Bridging

## Abstract

This article aims at implementing its theory and methodology to the debate on virtual communities used as learning communities.

We shall therefore submit a research hypothesis that is yet to be verified empirically, in order to share the theoretical construction and the methodological set-up that form its foundations.

The pedagogical vision is filtered through the lenses of sociology where the individual and the academic and technological community can face a final wider project: the construction and generation of knowledge through the use of open and transitional communities, in which each of the individual identities has the possibility of recognizing itself at the same time as a single and as a collective project.

This will be addressed to a new social exchange where it will take place in an open context, a transitional one, of exchange and of webs in which the word community takes on a broader and less limiting meaning.

No community is in fact “naturally” drawn to high levels of formative objectives like reflective thought, relational capacities, individual and social empowerment, but can nonetheless be manipulated pedagogically, working

on the construction of relations and on their multiplication.

Virtual space becomes a resource if it favours aperture and transits and if it allows the construction of a social capital, usable as an individual resource.

## 1 Community and Identity in the Processes of Learning: the Role of Social Capital

Learning is a changing process that the subject operates constantly in relation to its own material and cognitive experience and the natural and cultural environment. (Piaget J., 1983; Vygotskij S., 1966)

This definition can be used as a model of interpretation both in real and virtual environments; ones that are not opposite one another, but that share a space of continuity in being one in respect to the other.

In the physical formal learning process there is a classroom in which cognitive, emotional and relational based interactions take place, that progressively, building up on one another, become a class: a space full of shared meanings, characterized by a unique semantic space and by interpersonal dynamics and fixed interpretative/hermeneutic dynamics.

Also the net, the virtual classroom, can become a class by tracing its social and cognitive dynamics.

In both cases, however, one can metaphorically choose to keep the door open or closed, allowing transit between one class and another, authorizing the entries and the exits, allowing extra territorial relations in between those given. This possibility favours the bridging out of a real or virtual class, thanks to the ties existent between different people, who are heterogeneous, open to the exchange and the construction of relations with other groups.

In contrast, there are bonding groups, classes with closed doors, connected to a social capital that creates links among equals, constructing homogeneous and closed groups.

In both cases the groups can be considered as communities. Individual choice is not dichotomised, but is set on a continuum positioned at the extreme end of each group (and community) with functions of bonding and bridging.

What do we mean, therefore, by the term “community”? In what position do we set the individual with his/her characteristics of unicity and in relation to a wider ensemble that is society?

In the sociological tradition community and society are two contrasting concepts: the community and the “us” in opposition to “them”. But not a genuine and simple “us”, but rather a condition of implicit and shared consent on the values, traditions, attitudes, spirituality which are never explicitly declared as such, without having the community model identified or chosen, since it pre-

sents itself as a “a natural event stronger and more secure because we haven’t chosen it on purpose, we have not done anything for it to exist and we cannot do anything to untie its relations.” (Bauman Z., 2000, p. 25)

A community represents security for the individual, it offers him/her the symbolic resources for the construction of the individual identity and can supply a simple recognition and “natural thought”.

What happens when strangers enter the community?

The division between “us” and “them” falls, borders disappear because “the stranger” does not consider natural the communitarian horizon and he does not recognise him/herself as a social individual.

At this point it is probable that the community reacts with resistance, using all more radical and specific codes of communication, intensifying the relations with similar people and deliberately ignoring the new ones, even if these could be potential creators of new learning experiences or of acquisitions of knowledge and competence.

Every community is extended around its own social horizon and connects the individuals to relations of availability that are constitutive of the social capital, definable as the union of the available relations to gain access (or not) to career opportunities, of social status, of instruction for an individual, an organisation or an entire territory (Bagnasco A. *et al.*, 2001).

On the basis of this sociological definition and of the pedagogical and didactic literature on the communities of learning (Wenger E. *et al.*, 2007; Brown A., Campione J., 1990) the first step of an empiric research is to pinpoint what really are “communities of learning” among the many that call themselves such, in order to pass on to an evaluation of the possible acquired learning skills, intended as pieces of knowledge and competences which are referable to the capacity of doing and capacity of being.

The evaluation of the communitarian context and of the individual learning processes is possible thanks to the use of online participating observation and “non-standard” interviews (Marradi A., 2003; Nigris D., 2003).

## 2 Social Capital as a Pedagogical Resource

What appears to us very relevant in a perspective of growth and formation is specifically linking as a social capital (Forsè M., Tronca L., 2005): the union of all relationships capable of bridging the gap between “us” and “them”, between the inside and outside of different communities, of spreading the available resources to everyone, without taking for granted the values, nor the consolidated communitarian praxis. This way the community changes through bridging; pedagogically it is the class group, whether real or virtual, which has become a bridging-class-group.

Is the community therefore the best context for learning?

Probably only when it is fed by the humus of the linking and of the relationships that bring access to the resources which do not exist exclusively around the communitarian identity. The community as a matter of fact can be limiting and can hinder an open and rational process of learning. It is a limit imposed by a sense of belonging to delay the explorations and the discoveries that could be potentially harmful to the other members of the community. It is an obstacle to all innovations that could put a stop to any implicit or explicit “commitment” of the community members.

So how can we manage to link on one hand the class-group and on the other guarantee a real and virtual learning experience? The two paths will meet at the pedagogical crossways that mark their future: a matter that should not be solved in a technological environment but with a larger social project in mind. The “reality” of the class is not given by its physical being, but by the building up of didactic/academic processes, and by the capability of the group to create an open link with the world and with reality. If the virtual space of the web needs to be created and used with formative aims, then it should be used as an open class, spending the linking social capital that will offer new opportunities and will create a transitional space not limited by formal closures.

In this perspective one will (no longer) go on the web to “take”(download) but to “give” and to “give oneself” to others, to construct an identity that juggles and integrates with formal and informal language, aiming to create a more open environment in which individual identity is constructed in relation to numerous communities.

To focus on the potential multiplication of relationships in online communitarian contexts means to analyse their characteristics and their peculiarities: the frequency of the relations, their density, their symbolic content and value, the sense given by every person who enacts each relation. Each of these aspects operates in a territory that, despite being virtual, is anthropologically manipulated and inhabited.

The physical territory does not necessarily correspond to the community, there can be superimpositions but the territories are larger, more complex and articulated than the communities. Relationships and territory are two of the resources that each individual “exploits” for the construction of his or her identity, and both resources can be utilized strategically and with awareness or given for granted.

Academically, what makes a learning process “communitarian” is the joint venture of people that construct knowledge and values, which is possible through a path which identifies similar objectives and roles. To co-construct means to get different identities involved in a process of responsibility towards oneself and the others and -at the same time- help on the evaluation of the contingent

nature and potentially changeable evaluation of ones own belonging.

To plan a project of learning is like designing a new environment, where one manages the relations, negotiates the objectives and at the same time leaves the single individual free to be in or out of it. The approach is narrative: a space with multiple stories where the protagonist lives complex plots with open endings and ready to new narrative developments. It is a plot that is generated by the single descendant who draws new cognitive maps partially superimposable to other plots and other maps. The management of online multiple narrative learning is surely more complex than the construction of an online communitarian space. But if the latter risks to be “poor” and lacking in emotionally significant relations, the former has, vice-versa, the aspiration to play on the emotions and on the expectations of who wishes to participate to the co-construction of the multiple stories.

### 3 Hypothesis of research

The theoretical and experimental picture described implies an attempt to empirically search its fitting in the virtual environments dedicated to learning, equipped with communitarian characteristics and with tools that allow the fruition of many users.

Thanks to the academic experience developed from the standing point of the lecturers of an online course and based on a preliminary exploration (both inquisitive and participative) (Melucci A., 1998) of the automatic tracings of the internal messages of three formative environments (in particular we refer to the platforms used for distance learning by the Scuola Istruzione a Distanza of the University of Rome Tor Vergata – Moodle platform- by the Mifav of the University of Rome Tor Vergata – LIFE platform - and by the Baicr Sistema Cultura-Maflada platform-), we have expressed some considerations and pointed out different paths to further verify empirically and we have made a quantitative evaluation through participative observation and “non-standard” interviews both online and offline. Also the use of online qualitative instruments was possible thanks to the peculiarities of the contexts analysed: the platforms for distance learning are spaces that are accessible only through the overcoming of formal ties (login and password) that allow the identification of all members. The researchers are not and cannot be “hidden” observers as if they wished to carry out experiments “in vitro”, but rather, active members recognisable from within the platform, stating clear objectives, methodologies and research goals.

This way one can develop a relational game (Ranci C., 1998) which is played both by the social actors (in our case these will be the students) and the researchers (in some cases also the faculty). It is through this path which is not

free of risks and potential methodological “traps”, that the first considerations will be made.

The first remark concerns the “social” nature of the platforms and the analysed virtual environments that in some cases are communitarian only in name since the use of the cognitive resources is mostly individual. The communication is mostly asynchronous and characterized by many “one to one” and “one to many” passages - and on the contrary - few “many to many” exchanges.

The second remark is about the topic of “aware cohesiveness”: in a communitarian context, the community itself has coercive effects that operate at a lower level than the one of the explication, while in the platforms that are dedicated to distance learning one enters (and stays) with awareness and deliberately, to follow a path whose objectives are substantially made clear and accepted.

The third remark concerns the organisation of the timings for the members of the formative path.

On one hand, we will try to reproduce the organisation (the class) and the right timing of the learning in presence, artificially creating groups of students on the basis of a cooperative communication model.

In the other platforms, on the other hand, the temporal organisation privileges the autonomy of the student while the administration applies the academic year.

The formal timing imposed by the structure does not seem, at present, to be an incentive for the conclusion of the course of studies.

The fourth and last remark is about the evaluation of the learning processes: the value of the intermediate formative tests (completed online) and the final tests (completed in presence) do not seem to indicate a link between the online communitarian context and the best learning results.

After this first analysis, we have clearly pointed out three steps that will be object of a specific elaboration with the users of the three platforms.

The first refers to the relations created in the environments organized in the communities; in this hypothesis the relations aim at respecting the rules and the norms proposed by the management/coordinators of the environment (tendency to conformism) where diffused relationships will not help develop the learning process, nor the process of bridging through other environments and virtual spaces. The second step follows the hypothesis that in some cases the environments that self-define themselves as communities struggle to favour a path that can integrate the “external” online resources; therefore paths of personal learning environment are not created and fail to increment the diffused relations.

The third and final path is about the pinpointing (if there are) of positive ties among the learning scores and, respectively, a) virtual communities, b)

sociable bridging relations.

The results expected from the research are:

- the pinpointing and standardisation of quality and quantity indicators inside the e-learning platforms analysed on the basis of a) communication and relations, b) individual learning processes;
- a first evaluation of the positive and negative correlations about the increase of relationships between the platforms and e-learning and individual elaboration.
- a first predisposition of instruments and paths for the support of e-learning platforms.

## Conclusion

The internet today is, with the advent of the web 2.0, a relational space because “on the net a certain phenomenology of identity develops [...]: not just an “I”, but multiple “masks-people” enter in action; pro-tempore identities are created, only within the limited temporal time frame of medial communication, ephemeral simulacrum of the cyberspace, while the social belongings that the net gives rise to both greatly enlarge and disappear at the same time”. (Calvani A. 2009, p. 612)

The academic platforms and the institutionally apt environments of the learning process, in order to correspond to the complexity of the knowledge and of the conscience, need be thought through, projected and structured more as environments dedicated to sociability and to multiple relations than as communities in the traditional meaning of the word.

Also the contemporary constructive paradigm (Spinelli A., 2009), on the other hand, defines at a theoretical level knowledge as a constant negotiation between individuals of different backgrounds and the learning process as the consequence of the relation of the subject with a reality free from strong relations of an ontological kind.

To put in practice empirically what said above means to overcome the concept of community altogether and to find in an open group and in bridging relations the engine of a learning process which is in sync with the social characteristics, the cognitive features and organisational ones of contemporary knowledge society.

The utopian interpretations of the net can be replaced with the idea of an eutopic perspective, that will interpret the net as “a good place”, where environments and realities and knowledge multiply, in which thanks to a correct and open communication between the individual and the collectivity, between social and communitarian, pedagogical and technological dialect, one can practice a new poetics of the relations (Glissant E., 2007), made of transits in

the diversities in which the environment becomes a new possibility rather than a limit, transforming itself into an entour.

The virtual environment can therefore really become this time, the transformation of power into a true act, but this is possible only if the formative and relational project has its own independent value and is considered as a moment of growth and enrichment, of discipline and personal in-depth examination, of meta-reflective opportunities and opportunities of sharing independently from the instrument that bounds it.

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