Strategically maintaining online learning community in a postgraduate writing program

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Building and maintaining online learning communities (OLCs) among learners of postgraduate writing is crucial to these students' investments in creating effective texts for assessment and possible publication. Well-facilitated OLCs becomes sites of identity negotiation and construction for postgraduate writers, as they create authentic texts and apply industry-focused, text preparation skills for the 'unknown future' Barnett (2004) characterises as a key feature of early 21st century Higher Education. This study uses social constructivist, situated pedagogical theories of building and maintaining e-communities to situate a discussion of strategies experienced tutors use to develop and maintain effective e-communities for writers. The context of the study is a core first-year unit 'Critical friends' in an online Master of Arts (Writing) taught from Melbourne, Australia. This unit aims to socialise groups of distance learners into quasi-communities of practice (CoPs) by exploiting the possibilities for primarily asynchronous discussion within the Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN) of the Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard. The strategies offer support between facilitators and the OLC and among participant members. Establishment and maintenance of OLCs can help to break down feelings of marginalisation, offer insider support, harness common goals, encourage shared discourse and promote 'belongingness'. This involves facilitating participants' individual and collective learning and providing contexts where it might continue temporally and spatially in real and imagined communities beyond the group.

Key words: writing, online learning community, community of practice, imagined community

Introduction: E-community in online writing programs

While many studies across the gamut of disciplines support 'the supposition that the social phenomenon of community may be put to good use in the support of online learning' (Brook & Oliver, 2003a), studies of building and maintaining e-community in online *writing* programs are scant. Swinburne University's online postgraduate writing programs reach and teach potential writers throughout Australia and overseas by strategically building, mediating and maintaining online learning communities (OLCs) in the first year core subject 'Critical friends'. The individuals' geographic remoteness and faceless anonymity pose challenges for learning online and, moreover, for teaching *writing*, an intimate subject, online. Writing students strive to develop characteristic voices and identities through textual creation and production, a challenge in the social context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as opposed to the tutorial workshopping characteristically offered in writing pedagogy. Students who enrol in a writing program are motivated by desire to belong to an *imagined* community labelled 'writers', yet this personal motivation involves participation in apparently impersonal CMC within a temporally-aspecific Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN). The nature of writing is intrinsically intimate and the sharing of created texts involves trust and the critiquing of often-creative texts in which writers have an emotional investment. The challenge to

maximise learning by interaction with others, using class members as resources and mentors is mitigated by the fact that these students are *postgraduate* writers, so each individual brings their own experience to the learning environment.

The challenge for teaching writing in an online environment lies primarily in building students' investments in a necessarily constructivist pedagogy involving learner-centred peer and community support. The facilitators' major role lies in building 'social presence' (Gunawardena, 1995, Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), defined as 'the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships' (Short, et al., 1976, p.65). Building, mediating and maintaining online learning communities in writing depends on promoting salience. There is a further challenge in preparing students within the program for 'unknown futures' (Barnett, 2004) as would-be affiliates of real and imagined communities of writers. Preparing postgraduate writers involves writers fostering 'an indwelling in themselves' enabling future action in a challenging world (Barnett, 2004, p. 253). This suggests a socio-cultural investment in accessing the present and future culture and power of writing groups and industries beyond the e-classroom as well a personal or academic one to achieve a distinctive voice and earn the status and identity of 'writer'.

This paper describes strategies experienced writing tutors employ to rise to these challenges and to be salient, all of which are in accord with existing literature on e-community maintenance (Kim, 2000; Rovai, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Brook & Oliver, 2003a, 2003b). The strategies presented here emerged from a broader qualitative study in which tutors were interviewed and student reflections on their engagement in OLCs analysed (Andrew, 2009). My goal here is to present the strategies for sustaining e-community that emerged from the thick description and to contextualise the strategies briefly within social constructivist and poststructuralist thought about *online learning communities, sense of community, communities of practice, imagined communities,* and the particular need for online writing facilitators to foster individual and group identities, both the 'I' and the 'we'.

Online learning communities (OLCs)

Educationalists in sociology, applied linguistics, community psychology or CMC buzz with the term 'community' and disciplines select aspects to suit their contexts. Despite book-length elucidations of 'community' (Tönnies, 1955; Putnam, 2000; Block, 2008), an all-encompassing definition that satisfies everyone is elusive. Across disciplines researchers do, however, agree on essential elements such as *sense of place, socialisation/ support* and *a cohesive context leading to senses of identity, belonging and purpose* (Brook & Oliver, 2003a, pp.139-140; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Communities, Cohen (1986) established, are constructed by interaction and are sites of individual and collective identity (p.118). The need for a common source of identification, a focus of the *salience* Gunawardena (1995) emphasises, is crucial. Hung & Der-Thanq (2001) write: 'People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something – a need, a common shared goal and identity' (p.3). In online postgraduate writing, the common goal becomes supporting each other to create the most effective individual texts possible in the timeframe. The pedagogy demands that learners care about critical friends' texts. The role of the tutor becomes the constructivist role of facilitating this process.

Attempts to apply 'community' to educational projects, especially in CMC, tend to include the Wengerian concepts of *support, common goals, shared discourse* and *desire for membership and relatedness* (Rovai, 2002b, p.321) characteristic of communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This is true, too, in many studies of OLCs (Johnson, 2001) and is discussed further below. For instance Tu and Corry's framework for building e-learning communities (2002) is founded on the belief that in a community, learning occurs as a social process: "In an e-learning community, members work together to solve their problems and to improve their communities using knowledge construction media and technology" (p.209). There are collective solutions to individual problems and creating the best possible text is each writing students' 'problem'. Although it is still true that the natural and rational will of the individual is crucial (Tönnies, 1955), the purposeful sharing of knowledge, promoted in both CoPs and OLCs is a primary element of 'community' (Brook & Oliver, 2003a).

A crowded field of literature has continued to identify the essential elements of online or virtual learning communities since Jones (1995) predicted CMC would see online education creating 'new forms of community' (p.14). Rovai (2002a), broadening the Wengerian base, essentialises them as *mutual interdependence, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals* and *overlapping life histories* (p.4). Logically overlapping, Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) summarise characteristics emerging in a computer-supported distance

learning program: *recognition of members and non-members, a shared history, a common meeting place, commitment to a common purpose, adoption of normative standards of behaviour,* and *emergence of hierarchy and roles.* Other recent research indicates that OLCs can provide essential elements of support and belonging (Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry, 2002; Brook & Oliver, 2003a, 2003b; Augar, Raitman & Zhou, 2004; LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008). These elements suggest the importance of the connection between participation, investment and individual and collective identity. Thus, Brown and Duguid (2000) established three principles for learning in learning communities, namely that it is: *demand-driven, a social act* and *an act of identity formation.* Within environments of real and flexible learning, learning in 'community' is a participative, social process and is situated.

Tu and Corry (2002) remind us communities can be 'real' or 'imagined', 'real' or 'virtual'. They can be CoPs, which can in turn be communities of interest, purpose and passion (p.209). Any of these can be 'communities of inquiry', characterised by a high degree of social, cognitive and teaching presence, co-construction of meaning and interactivity (Rourke et al. 2001). In the online environment, participants form what Tönnies (1955) called 'communities of the mind'. 'Imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), described below, and e-communities are subsets of these. In Scott and Johnson's definition (2005), 'e-communities' comprise 'groups of people with common interests that communicate regularly, and for some duration, in an organised way, over the Internet' (p.1). They might be lobby groups or cultural maintenance sites. More specifically, OLCs, to paraphrase Saragina (1999), comprise individuals interacting in a common location for the purpose of gaining knowledge or understanding of a subject matter through instruction, study, and/ or experience by the creation of a social state and condition that nurtures or encourages learners.

Sense of community

Being communities of the mind, the social state or condition of online learning communities is best made tangible by calling it *sense of community* (SoC). McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceived of this as 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that learners' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (p.9) and itemised its elements as *membership, influence, fulfilment of needs* and *shared emotional connection.* Although increasing numbers of empirical studies formulate and apply measures of SoC (McMillan & Chavis 1986, Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Brook & Oliver, 2003b; Obst et al., 2002; Rovai, et al., 2004), most notably the SOC Index (SCI), to remove non-empirical but apparent value judgements of 'maudlin togetherness' (Sarason, 1974, p.157), I do not propose to apply them to online writing students' SoC here. Rather, I suggest the usefulness of the concept of SoC for guiding the application of the strategies writing tutors identify as central to building and maintaining e-community. The key to this study is negotiating a feeling of *purpose* that accords with individuals' needs, unit outcomes and community goals and desires not quantifying it.

In defining one's *psychological sense of community* Lorion and Newbrough (1996) established that 'community' denoted 'one's sense of place, its people, their interrelationships, their shared caring for one another and their sense of belonging' (p.312). Foster (1996) offers another conceptualisation of 'community' that is consonant with writing OLCs: 'a set of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable "we-feeling"' (1996, p.25). This 'we feeling' accords with social presence theory, where *salience* determines the extent of bonding between individual participants, the degree to which online communities evolve (Gunawardena, 1996) and the reported satisfaction of participants (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Rourke et al. 2001). In writing, OLCs evolve as a result of individuals' asserting identities and such acts of assertion being respected, valued and reciprocated. Walther (1992) indicated how identities are understood in CMC contexts. Participants assert identities through acts of text generation and their peers build impressions, leading to the development of 'relationships' and even 'friendships' over time. Text-based media is content-rich (Gunawardena, 1995, p.154), especially for writers, so opportunities for identity negotiation are many.

Communities of practice

The concepts of *community of practice* and *imagined communities* accord with many key frameworks focussing on learning through participation including socio-cultural and new literacy approaches. The situating of learning in the social world derives from the work of Lave and Wenger in their constructivist theories of learning and identity (1991, 1998). Post-structuralist theories of investment, cultural and social capital and its connection with evolving learner identity (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Ivanic, 1997; Norton, 2000, 2010) sit alongside constructivist models of identity negotiation. *Personal*

investment is a recognised measure of SoC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.10). Studies of e-community that engage with the ontological dimension of participation within a social model of situated learning better understand the connections between investment, community and identity (Tu & Corry, 2002).

The OLCs in this project are envisaged in terms of 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger 1998; Brown & Duguid, 2000; Johnson, 2001). Researchers of OLCs have applied CoPs as a model for e-learning communities (Johnson, 2001; Hung & Nichani, 2002; McConnell, 2002, Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry, 2002; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). Johnson (2001) maintains virtual communities are designed while CoPs emerge (p.56) and warns that the establishment of a virtual community does not guarantee an emerging CoP although it is 'the ultimate goal' (p.57). Facilitation, using such strategies as those described in this article and others cited here, is required. CoPs have three elements: *relations among persons, activity and the world, existence over time* and *relation to other communities* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.98). Potentially expert learning occurs through initially peripheral participation in or with a community. This, too, requires facilitation. Persistent investment in participation can motivate learners to reach their learning goals more effectively through the forming of strategic alliances with and within appropriate communities. Ability to access community resources such as peer mentoring and lecturer supervision can have both collective and individual impacts on motivation and learning. Research in using e-communities to promote learners' reaching course outcomes, supports this assertion (Tu & Corry, 2002; Augar et al. 2002; Brook & Oliver, 2003a; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008).

Wenger (1998) identified three characteristics of any CoP which are also components of successful e-communities and which 'Critical friends' aims to harness: These are *mutual engagement* (the regular interactions of community members), *joint enterprise* (the members' common endeavour, goal, vision or pursuit) and *shared repertoire* (ways of thinking, speaking, expressing, remembering common to the community). The regularity of a CoP's mutual engagement allows learners chances to enter (as apprentices) and continue in (as participants) these ALN-based communities visited and facilitated by the tutor. Mutual engagement also builds social presence, characterised, according to Rovai (2003), by 'reciprocal awareness by others of an individual and the individual's awareness of others' (p. 92). The joint enterprise, a kind of group investment, a sense of a single goal for which all are striving, ensures that members communicate meaningfully and guide new members and negotiate knowing. Again citing Rovai (2003), if we view 'community' as activities people do together, their joint enterprise, this allows sense of community at a distance and promotes belonging (p.91). The community's shared repertoire contains specific information that participants can access, share, own and reflect on. In an e-environment, the virtual space containing the curricular information alongside the students' artefacts and collaborations represents the shared repertoire of the community (Prasolova-Førland & Divitini, 2003). The concept of shared repertoire is important considering it contains capital that can help learners access imagined communities. The combined knowledge of tutors and community members in the e-writing context, for instance, might offer a range of websites to view, conferences and festivals to attend, competitions to enter and communities to join.

OLCs, then, share many of the properties of CoPs but they need to be designed and facilitated to lead to the emergence of the CoP. They are centred on task orientation, negotiated knowledge through peer discussion and the repertoire of discourse communities. With the tutor as coach/facilitator, they promote learning via communication between members and enable 'situated' learning (Johnson, 2001, p.48). They enable how to learn and share the information, rather than focussing purely on content. Hung & Nichani (2002) maintain that online communities, lacking the face-to-face (FTF) and group-organisational components, can be described as 'quasi-CoPs' (p.25). At the very least writing e-communities are quasi-CoPs. They are also imagined communities.

Imagined communities

The notion of 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2001, 2010; Kanno & Norton, 2003), a type of 'community of the mind' (Tönnies, 1955), can include OLCs of online participants aiming for similar course outcomes and personal goals (Foster, 1996, p.25). The imagined community of people, analogous to a nation (Anderson, 1983), can be seen as groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, 'with whom we connect through the power of the imagination' (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p.241). Similarly, in CMC, the people are 'unreachable', but bound by a single interest (Haythornthwaite et al. 2000). In applying Anderson's concept, a culture's SoC is envisaged as an imagined space and individuals idealise community and create a sense of self through these imaginings. There are, as in Lave and Wenger's (1991) formulations, connections between imagined community

and desired identity. As Foster (1996) writes, 'the organization of the self is the foundation of the communicative effect' (p.26). Individuals participating together, sharing the same outcomes and learning horizontally, characterise virtual learning communities (Saragina, 1999; Tu & Corry, 2002; Haythornthwaite et al., 2000; Brook & Oliver, 2003a). By building and sustaining imagined e-learning communities tutors can ensure members share concerns, develop a sense of belonging, develop trust and learn from each other (Muldoon & Macdonald, 2009). As George (2002) says, 'students are more likely to find time to participate in the e-community when they develop a learning relationship with other members' (p.15). 'As they build stronger, more intimate ties', write Hathornthwaite et al. online (2000), 'they gain access to the kind of support and continuity that underpins community'.

The concept of imagined communities helps us to understand why it is necessary to sustain virtual communities. The notion enables our understanding that learners' investment in a present community can impact on future membership in a desired community – in this case, a community of people who can call themselves real writers. In this sense, the pedagogies described here contribute towards learners gaining the qualities of self-energising and self-confidence characteristic of the pedagogic self that Barnett (2004) claimed as requisite for Higher Education students learning for an unknown future. Understanding learner's need to belong to present and future imagined communities can also affect the individual and personal education they need to undertake in order to warrant future memberships.

The facilitator's role in sustaining online belonging

Recent literature indicates that instructor/facilitator/tutors should engage learners in the OLC as peers and community members from an early stage and maintain this engagement (Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Tu & Corry, 2002; Augar et al., 2004). According to Rovai (2002b), 'a strong sense of community can be created by a combination of facilitation skills, team-building activities, and group interaction ' (p.331). The basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied for each individual. In a study of 'belonging online', LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) emphasise that online students *need* a learning community in order to achieve optimal learning (p.652). Instructors need to build on the varied investments in online learning that students who have chosen this medium bring to it, encouraging communications between more and less invested individuals.

Participants who report negatively about learning in e-communities tend either to be dissatisfied with the amount or quality of their instructor's individual feedback or with the perfunctoriness of peer interactions and collaborations (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008). Some online learners may be psychosocially isolationist by preference (Rovai, 2002a; Caplan, 2003). Its seeming marginalisation of participants and lack of personal immediacy can disturb some learners (Rovai, 2003; Augar et al., 2004, LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). Regardless of whether participants are naturally socially oriented or or isolationist, there is consensus in the literature that online education can harness the potential of e-learning communities.

A great part of the tutor's role lies in managing learners' asserted discursive identities. Online communities establish themselves with introductions, with some people revealing more than others, and then others open up more candidly. The learning community offers learners a chance to reflect on and renegotiate their changing identities. This references Wenger. Learning communities become places of identity to the extent they 'make trajectories possible—that is, to the extent they offer a past and a future that can be experienced as a personal trajectory'' (1998, p.215). Facilitating such trajectories is central to the learning of writing online. The tutor also looks for possibilities where students might gain from mutual collaboration and using the language of professional and academic writing discourse communities. When learners benefit from collegiality and mutuality in the potential virtual community, they gain much in terms of self-confidence, feeling of being a step nearer the possibility of reaching a desired imagined community of practice and being closer having their texts scrutinised professionally. These outcomes are serendipitous by-products of participation in a learning community, but are possible when strategies such as those presented here are applied.

Rovai (2002a, pp.6-11) identified seven positive correlates to building and maintaining community in courses using an LMS such as Blackboard: *transactional distance* (psychological distance between instructors and students), *social presence* (instructor visibility), *social equality* (ensuring equal opportunity for 'separate' and 'connected' voices), *small group activities* (activities in sub-communities), *group facilitation* (the instructional voice maximising dialogue about community tasks and maintaining relations), *teaching style* (level of control exercised in leading learners towards autonomy) and *community size* (mentoring requires a small community of around ten as desire for

individual attention is the major source of retention according to Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). These correlates impact on the strategies for sustaining e-community described below.

E-learning communities of graduate writers

Swinburne's online MA in Writing is a nested suite of subjects offered throughout Australia and the world as a means of accessing contexts for teaching and learning theories of writing, providing multi-generic contexts for written practice and feedback and rehearsing future identities as writers. The program uses Blackboard's discussion boards as a virtual environment for developing the potential learning community. Although the system provides options for synchronous Internet Relay Chat (IRC), its backbones are conference areas where threaded discussions occur or wiki spaces where texts can be developed over time. These help the students feel they are part of the OLC and emerging CoP, boosting their confidence in their own learning and their ability to communicate with others (George, 2002, p.16). The asynchronous discussion board forum, fuelled by stimulating cues, weblinks and associated text and interview-style lectures, is a site for student assertions, responses, reflections and exchanges. Such interactions are the components of critical friendship. On a weekly basis, instructors facilitate, monitor and mediate the boards, offering individual and generic feedback and encouraging further reflective responsiveness. This encourages fruitful collaborations between participants.

As mentioned, the core subject of year one is 'Critical friends'. 'Critical friendship' means an organised, mutual, reciprocal exchange of ideas and feedback for the purposes of improving submissions before they are posted to tutors. Critical friendship involves giving and receiving feedback at all textual levels, including mechanical-discursive and critical-analytic levels. The features of OLCs described above are potentially present in the discussion board interactions, in the critical collaborations between participants, and in the synchronous discussion forum attached to the CMS. Critical friendships are forged early in a 12-week course between sympathetic participants within online discussion forums mediated by tutors.

The remainder of this paper examines the mediations that nine tutors of the program reports as useful in building e-communities. Tutors responded to e-questionnaires asking, amongst other questions, what strategies they found effective in encouraging participation, ideas exchange and textual collaboration within their tutorial groups. The study used a grounded methodological approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1998) and other findings are discussed elsewhere (Andrew, 2009).

Strategies for maintaining online learning communities

Accessing the potential of OLCs presents a rich range of teaching and learning opportunities for instructors and students. The learning is situated and involves participation in quasi-CoPs so its benefits may seem serendipities rather than curricular outcomes. These rewards may be educational or ontological, such as developing a sense on 'belonging' online or building confidence with a writing identity. Students may gain insights into how they can perform in a real-world context and how they can learn from the support and experience of community members. Critical friendship involves practising the real-world contexts of copy-reading, editing and supervising, characteristic of their future imagined communities (perhaps newsrooms, publishers, universities) and of the skills they need for the unknown future. They may also gain heightened understandings of their own ability as autonomous community members and potentially agential individuals. In harnessing the potential of learning communities, instructors, aware of the importance of social presence and immediacy, can follow a range of principles to *enable, support* and *facilitate* communication (Brook & Oliver, 2003a). The following responses, covering the range of *affective, interactive* and *cohesive* identified by Rourke et al. (2001) emerged from data collected from questionnaires.

Ensure learners know how to participate in their learning community

From the outset, programs or units need to establish clear protocols for contributing to discussions. The writing team negotiated a protocol in 2007. It is published in each unit outline and is introduced in week 1 to create a culture of support, trust, safety. The culture created by a tutorial group needs to be managed by facilitators with respect to acceptable language and content. This covers issues of netiquette and appropriateness, and has at its base respect for the identities, beliefs and ideologies of other participants while asserting one's own. Learning communities need to be safe, promoting of trust and non-threatening. Comments on such issues as race, gender and sexuality need to be couched

appropriately. The tutor moderates the repertoire of the group since it needs to be shared and owned. This strategy involves, in sociolinguistic terms, preparing learners socio-pragmatically for effective transactions and interactions. Further, it is crucial to direct learners to whatever academic, information management, administrative and counselling support is available.

Ensure that participation in the learning community starts well

Facilitating social presence from the outset is crucial in CMC contexts to harness participant confidence and happiness (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Tutors indicate that keeping in touch with each individual and ensuring their needs are met as they negotiate their new learning community is a reliable predictor of retention and success. Facilitating learner socialisation into the unit can be achieved by observing the following affective, interactive and cohesive responses:

- Set up opportunities for participants to contribute and ensure these opportunities are accessible
- Ensure assessments and their due dates are clear and resources about them accessible
- Notice those whose interactions are fewer in number or less dense in content, and implement strategies for involvement, ensuring all learners understand what is expected
- Keep an eye out for synchronicities and sympathies between learners and match-make them into critical friendships
- Review the progress of individuals regularly, ensure that individuals are given feedback and encourage them to respond to the feedback to trigger iterative learning
- Capitalise on those members who demonstrate a natural orientation for mentoring skills and desire to help others
- Provide a private context for problem-solving and conflict resolution outside the learning community to ensure the discussion boards do not contain contentious texts.

Work on maintaining and developing the learning community

The roles of the tutor interested in sustaining e-community include initiating discussion (Rovai, 2003, p.95), providing new ideas for members to consider, and developing responses that articulate the general feeling of the group without ignoring any controversial student responses. Individual understanding evolves out of such interaction (Rovai, 2003, p.104). Cater to individual needs by, wherever possible, catering to group needs. Strategically, the tutor can use open questions, share experiences and appreciate the experiences of others. One way to do this is to make connections between individuals' contributions. The tutor can stimulate critical responsiveness among group members and encourage reflective responsiveness so that students not only assert their own identities by posting their responses, but also participate in the creation of others' identities by commenting on their contributions.

Consider imagined communities as well as learning community

Sensitivity to individuals' future goals begins with the open invitation for students to tell their stories in week 1. Encouraging phatic communication, like calling students by name, affects cohesion (Rourke et al. 2001). Armed with background information, the tutor can consider participant's future goals and manage interventions that facilitate their achievement. Through this, it may be possible to make connections between the present and potential future contexts of learning and to introduce professional and real-world linkages. But it is not only the tutor who should contribute knowledge of opportunities beyond the CoP. The tutor can encourage members of the community to bring to the group their own ideas about opportunities that may benefit others, enlarging the shared repertoire of the immediate community. Students can share information about writers' retreats or competitions, allowing others to access information they might otherwise keep to themselves.

Review and reflect on the community's lifespan

Encouraging learners to reflect on the value of aspects of their learning during the subject or program not only provides useful evaluative information; it also allows learners to see how far they have come. We use the final discussion board post during the 12-week duration of subjects to enable students to reflect in and on action. The collection of evaluative information contributes to the group's shared repertoire. Much of this information may be honest and frank, so a protocol that values trust is crucial. If it is logistically possible, tutors could support learners to progress one stage beyond the completed

course in order to show concern for their destinations. This might involve ensuring they re-enrol in the next subject, or taking an interest in vocational or publishing opportunities. Importantly, tutors can encourage the continuance of interactions formed during the lifespan of the learning community that have been fruitful. Strategies for this include the creation of online groups such as Yahoo communities, and the establishment of synchronous chat groups using such applications as MSN Messenger, meeting online at agreed times.

Consider the individuals who comprise the community

Firstly, it is important to identify and cater to students who do not suit OLCs. This involves negotiating individual transactions and establishing one-on-one connectedness via email. In some cases, students might be referred to sources of help beyond the community, such as the student learning centre. Balancing group and individual responsiveness need not be a tightrope walk. When offering feedback to a tutor group on a week by week basis, the tutor should balance group feedback in discussions with individual, ensuring both common and idiosyncratic ideas gain acknowledgement. Logistically, tutors should be immediate, for instance by responding within a negotiated time to discussion postings and as swiftly as possible to individuals' email enquiries. It is possible to build psychological SoC using critical praise, questioning, humour, self-disclosure and by making observations about individuals. While the position of the tutor as facilitator of the group may preclude the same level of membership as students, it remains vital for tutors to demonstrate affective social presence by regular attendance in forums. While contributing, a central role of the tutor lies in maximising potential for interaction by inviting participants to expand on or support their claims or by offering references that might expand a participant's horizons. It is useful too to remind individuals that the individual's own enterprise is part of the group's joint enterprise: your contribution helps to build our culture as a group.

Conclusions

The concept of OLC can be used as a model for studying the communicative interactions and learning and teaching transactions that characterise CMC virtual learning environments and ALNs delivered via the LMS Blackboard in postgraduate writing. An OLC can exploit a range of learning and teaching interactions and transactions, and in so doing can maximise the signs of SoC and trigger the emergence of a genuine CoP. Belongingness, membership, capitalising on the reciprocal and mutual support of already-experienced writers in the OLC and creating identities in text-rich postings and other sites of self-expression can offer long-lasting benefits to postgraduate students of writing. Not all enrolee writers may desire this degree of participation (Caplan, 2003) and may prefer a mode of studio inquiry where they can receive input and achieve self-development in a remote or isolated context. While they might not desire to be a part of the present e-learning community they do desire to become published writers, and therefore to have an identity in an imagined community of established or published writers. This may not demonstrate a desire for an imagined OLC in the context of the unit or even the 3-year program, but it certainly suggests an imagined future self. 'Belongingness' may seem essential for model OLCs and CoPs, but writing needs to accommodate individuals as well as the collective.

Instructor/coach/tutors can facilitate the emergence of quasi-CoPs, then build and sustain them by using a range of social, cognitive and affective strategies. These strategies are supported by recent literature into OLCs, CoPs and SoC. Specifically, they can ensure that the group has a culture that is known to and agreed to by all. Further, they need to be aware that individuals, particularly those experiencing anxiety over the e-medium or over the revelatory nature of writing in cyberspace need to feel a sense of belonging from week 1. Thirdly, facilitators should not rest complacently once a group seems to have started well, since participants can benefit to increasing their feelings of connectedness and belonging, and tutorial interventions can be crucial at this stage. It is important, too, to consider students' desire to identify as 'writer' and to build affiliations with communities beyond the group. Tutors are in a powerful position to identify and relay opportunities for further present and future 'belongingness'. They can contribute to learners' pedagogical being, helping them to learn for an essentially unknown future as possibly publishable writers (Barnett, 2004). Viewing the students' participation in their present quasi-CoP as part of a larger journey opens the possibility for participants to meet in other contexts in the longer term future and continue their critical friendships. Lastly, a tutor who can comment on any individual's contribution to the community, the subject and the discipline helps to show that individual how their contribution to the shared repertoire of the community has helped others.

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