

INTERACT INTEGRATE IMPACT

Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference
of the Australasian Society for Computers in
Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE)

Adelaide, Australia
7–10 December 2003

Editors

Geoffrey Crisp, Di Thiele, Ingrid Scholten, Sandra Barker, Judi Baron

Citations of works should have the following format:

Author, A. & Writer B. (2003). Paper title: What it's called. In G.Crisp, D.Thiele, I.Scholten, S.Barker and J.Baron (Eds), *Interact, Integrate, Impact: Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education*. Adelaide, 7-10 December 2003.

ISBN CDROM 0-9751702-1-X WEB 0-9751702-2-8



Published by ASCILITE www.ascilite.org.au

TURNING SPACE INTO PLACE: A COMMUNITY OF ONLINE LEARNERS SEEK MUTUAL SUPPORT IN A FAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT OF THEIR OWN MAKING.

Lisa Harris

School of Social Science and Planning
RMIT University, AUSTRALIA
lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This paper explores the development of a learning community by a group of students studying in a MOO environment. The MOO's inherent spatial qualities of place and sense of social presence provide similar qualities to a physical campus, as such replicating the opportunities for incidental social contact between students. Building on the work of previous research, this project examines the importance of the environment in mediating the development of students' social interactions in the MOO and finds evidence of the development of a student community or what this paper terms the Social Learning Support Networks between students.

Keywords

Community of inquiry; social presence; learning communities; MOO; social learning support networks; space.

Introduction

One of the standard legitimations advanced by students who favour the face-to-face or on campus model of tertiary education is the experience of 'social interaction' or what might be called 'community'. While the term 'community' abounds in recent literature relating to the development of online courses, there is still a level of uncertainty about what constitutes a community and what factors influence their development. Most explorations of community, or what this paper terms 'social learning support networks', in online learning environments tend to focus on students' interactions within the discussion boards or predefined 'social spaces' provided in a course module or Course Management Systems (CMS) to understand the nature of support provided by such a community. It would seem this is akin to trying to understand the nature and complexity of the social learning support networks developed between on-campus students by only examining what happens within the four walls of the classroom. In providing students with only a classroom type space online, this narrow perspective omits other valuable learning spaces or social engagement opportunities provided by the different spaces within and around a physical campus. This paper argues that these types of spaces and their role in the development of social connections and learning communities also need to be considered when constructing on line learning environments. This paper explores the development of a learning community by a group of RMIT undergraduate students studying a course provided through a virtual campus of RMIT created in a MOO environment (Multi user dimensions-Object-Oriented). This virtual campus contained hallways, staff offices, classrooms, student rooms, cafes, courtyards, etc, through which students wandered as part of their daily experience of being 'at Uni' - bumping into each other, playing jokes on each other, leaving their physical mark on this virtual world through the creation and movement of objects. This research used a number of qualitative methods to investigate the student interactions and development of social learning support networks over a twelve-week period. This paper outlines the established benefits of learning communities and provides a brief explanation of the constructivist pedagogy that underpins the desired formation of learning communities in the online learning environment. This research suggests the

MOO environment replicated many of the qualities found on a physical campus and therefore effectively allowed students to establish a strong social presence, which in turn supported their learning. The strength and value of this social connection for this particular group of students was evident in their day-to-day connections with each other where they often chose to just ‘hang out together’.

Learning Communities

The value of developing learning communities in tertiary learning environments is well documented in both the face-to-face educational literature and the online learning literature. Tinto’s (2000) research into the benefits of learning communities for on campus students is often cited by those educators and policy makers interested in the issues of student engagement and the quality of Higher Education in Australia (McInnis, 2001). In particular Tinto’s (2000) research highlights the value of collaborative learning settings and reported that the benefits of creating learning communities extended beyond just understanding the ‘content at hand better’ and included:

- Learning community students developed their own self-supporting groups, they spent more time together outside of the classroom and did so in ways students reported as supportive.
- Learning community students became more actively involved in classroom learning.
- Participation in the learning community seemed to enhance the quality of the student learning. Learning community students perceived themselves as having made significantly greater intellectual gains over the course of the semester than did other students.
- Tinto’s research with first year college students reported that learning community students persisted into second year at a rate twenty-five percentage points higher than non leaning community students.
- Students in these programs reported an increased sense of responsibility to participate in the learning experience, and an awareness of their responsibility for both their learning and the learning of others.

In the educational literature relating to online learning environments many authors include the development of learning communities as key factors in successful online courses (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Gunawardena et al., 2001, Palloff and Pratt, 1999, Clark, 1999, Ragan, 1998). The most detailed of these offerings has been Palloff and Pratt’s contribution to the literature ‘Building learning communities in cyberspace: effective strategies for the online classroom’ (1999). Palloff and Pratt have argued the development of student learning communities are so central to online learning environments that they state ‘Key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions. In other words, the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created sets the stage for successful learning outcomes’ (1999, p.5) At the heart of both Tinto’s and Palloff and Pratt’s approaches to teaching and learning is the adoption of a constructivist approach to learning.

A constructivist approach

Seminal authors on tertiary teaching and learning such as Biggs (1999) and Ramsden (1992) have adopted constructivist approaches to learning to inform their teaching and learning models. Biggs suggests constructivism provides a learning theory framework that ‘aid(s) reflection (and is) a theory of learning that is broad-based and empirically sound, and that easily translates into practice’ (1999, p.12). While there is no ‘one’ agreed upon definition of constructivism (Grabe and Grabe, 2001) Wheatley provides one of the most cited and eloquently written descriptions of constructivism:

A constructivist believes that knowledge is not disembodied but is intimately related to the action and experience of a learner - it is always contextual and never separated from the knower. To know is to act. To know is to understand *in a certain manner*, a manner which can be shared by others who join with you to form a community of understanding. (Wheatley, 1991, p.10)

Inherent within this constructivist approach is the need for dialogue between students as they reflect and contextualise their understanding of an issue. It is within this context of a ‘learning community’ that proponents of the social constructivist approach to learning suggest that it is the ‘trust’ engendered within

the group environment that provides a student with the opportunity to risk their perceptions, reflect on and realign their understandings of an issue through dialogue. This research sought to understand if and how these trust relationships developed in a MOO environment and how students expressed this trust through their interactions in the online learning environments they had chosen to study in.

Virtual Social Spaces (VSS)

As mentioned previously, the term ‘community’ abounds in literature relating to the delivery of on online courses and it has become almost standard practice to try and create a space defined as ‘social’ within a single course module. This often takes the form of a discussion board, generally appropriately named a café, bistro, etc, provided in a separate area of the online environment from the content related discussion boards. While these social spaces provide for interactions between the students, these interactions occur within the context of the particular course module being studied and there is no carry over of the individual students social presence from module to module or across the life of their program. Nunes et al recognising the limitations of social spaces created within specific course modules suggesting ‘students are transferred from one module environment to the next, the socialising and study mechanisms (e.g. non-module specific topics, discussion threads, well known environments, links facilities) are constantly disrupted. Furthermore, students lack an overall anchoring space that binds the different modules, cohorts and tutors together’ (Nunes et al., 2002, p.2). This concept of an ‘anchoring space’ is effectively provided for on-campus students by the physical buildings and surrounding amenities (shops, cafes, etc) which students pass through and/or congregate at, as part of their everyday student life. Attempts to overcome these issues by constructing VSS outside course modules have not always been successful even though students believed the development of social learning support networks were important and supported their learning processes (see McPherson et al., 2002). Conrad suggests this is likely to be because ‘in this construction, learners are pushed, not pulled, into a community framework, somewhat like an arranged marriage’ and as such learners resist the very processes designed to engage them. (Conrad, 2002, p.4) These artificially constructed environments fail to replicate a space in which students naturally create the trust relationships that build the peer-to-peer learning support networks described by Tinto (2000).

Turning space into place

It is clear that online learning environments provided within CMS’s struggle to replicate the kind of spaces in which many on-campus students develop social connections with each other. Harris (in press) found that the development of these social networks for students on campus often relied on the incidental, mostly informal connections people made while they were going about their daily business of being a student. This included students frequenting spaces such as local cafes, the library, corridors before class, or just walking around, entering or exiting the campus grounds. Burbules provides an excellent discussion on the conditions that are part of ‘the dynamic of creating and identifying a community’ suggesting these conditions include; mediating conditions, political conditions, and conditions of space and place. (Burbules, 2000, p.328) Relevant to this paper, his discussion on space and place provides a framework for understanding some of the inherent differences experienced by students between the physical campus and the type of environment many students encounter when entering an online module delivered via a CMS. Burbules suggests that ‘spatial arrangements and practices can be viewed as ways of shaping and constraining the possibilities of community’ and that these arrangements and practices are really about *space* becoming *place*. (Burbules, 2000, p.333). Place has a sense of being there, of familiarity, of recognizing that one has been there before and in that familiarity there is a sense of how to act, how to be in that space as opposed to another space and ‘the familiarity of the space and the familiarity of the activities characteristic of it create and support one another.’ (Burbules, 2000, p.333) Burbules sums it up brilliantly when he suggests ‘We know where we are when we know what we are supposed to do’ (Burbules, 2000, p.333). In an educational setting, while each room may have four walls, the way we act in a workshop space will be different to the way we act in a lecture theatre, the way we act in the library will be different to the way we act in the student common room. The established culture of the space (the shared expectations of what happens within that space) informs both our actions and our presence in that space. The second important factor in space becoming place Burbules suggests is the

capacity of individuals to create, alter and transform a space, to leave their finger prints on it, to design it and redesign it over again, adding 'In living their daily lives, people seek out spaces and reshape them according to the patterns of their needs and desires ... (and) these needs and desires are reshaped by the spaces available to them.' (2000, p.334). The single-dimension type of space created within most online learning environments doesn't create this same sense of place. For those courses operating within a CMS there is little architectural differentiation between courses (e.g Blackboard, one of the most common CMS, has a standard set of menu options that in most institutions cannot be edited), logging into one course looks virtually the same as logging into any other at that institution even though the content and learning activities will be quite different. While this uniformity of interface may assist users in navigating their way around the environment it is difficult to get a sense of the difference in 'feel' of the environment compared to that of another course. However, for Burbules the more critical factor is the lack of opportunity or capacity for students to 'customize and adapt (learning) spaces to one's own preferences and habits' noting the 'contents of Web sites, the links between resources, and so on, are determined by the authors/designers of these spaces, and are not subject to modification by the casual user' (2000, p.345). While these arguments appear congruent in the context of the structural boundaries created by the architecture of many CMS based courses, it is less clear that they would be appropriate if we could break out of the single dimension online classroom (albeit with a café in the corner of the room). If we could truly create a multi dimensional environment in which students wandered around, got lost, bumped into each other, joked with each other, got to define the colour of their clothes that day and what they were carrying around Uni with them, all in real time (synchronous), then it is possible that the nature of that environment would be more aligned to that 'place' called a campus. It is exactly this capacity to create objects (from items to carry around to whole rooms) and the capacity alter them at will, to extend a sense of social presence, to extend a sense of ones own identity, to create a sense of 'place', which makes MOOs an interesting learning environment to explore.

saMOOrai and the virtual RMIT Tokyo Building

A MOO is a text based virtual environment and there are three aspects of this environment that are different from the type of space created in a CMS: a sense of location; a sense of identity; and the capacity for users to create and alter objects. While individual MOO's have developed unique qualities Burka notes 'most have the following characteristics: several people can play at once; the game is partitioned into virtual spaces ("rooms") such that people and objects in one room cannot directly interact with people and objects in another room; all interaction takes place in text, not pictures or sounds' (1993, p.1) Creating this spatial distinctions between rooms is very important because it replicates a sense of the real world, Clodius suggests this creates a sense of place through location 'The sense of "being" somewhere is reinforced by the illusion of moving through spaces - one types "north", the description of the room changes, the objects in the room are different, and different options exist.' (1994, p.2)

The RMIT course CTXT1379: Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace course is offered by the Department of Psychology and Disability Studies as an elective to undergraduate students from a diverse range of disciplines. This course has been delivered in mixed delivery mode (first 11 weeks off campus, 12th week on campus) for four years. The online medium is particularly suited to the objectives of this course, which are to explore concepts of identity and community in cyberspace. The course is delivered via the virtual RMIT Tokyo Building in the saMOOrai MOO. The design of the course allows students to explore the concepts of identity and community in cyberspace, both in relation to themselves and their fellow students by assuming an identity (including name, gender and species) of their choosing to operate within the MOO, and in their wider explorations of communities that operate on the net. The students complete a number of activities including reflecting, via a journal, on the identity they have chosen and are required to explore and reflect on several issues, making contributions to blackboards (discussion boards) set up in specific rooms within the MOO and in three real time conferences held in seminar rooms in the MOO. The students meet with the other members of the course for the first time in the final week and only then are their true identities revealed. This group provided an ideal sample for the purpose of this research as the anonymity of participants required during the first 11 weeks of the course ensured that the social contact that developed between the students was not based on prior association, but rather on

the interactions that occurred directly within the MOO. Fifteen students enrolled in the course and thirteen agreed to provide access to their journals as part of this research project.

Key elements explored in this case study:

This case study is part of a wider investigation into the significance of community in tertiary online learning environments. Specifically this case study sought to understand what were students expectations of developing a sense of community with each other, did these students think community was important and why, how did these students relate (formally and informally) in this environment, did incidental meetings play a part in the connections developed, how did the ephemeral nature of the dialogue in the medium of the MOO alter students input, how was behaviour modelled in this medium, what cues in the medium assisted/hindered students participation, was there any concrete examples of the social connections that developed assisting students learning, and how did these students turn 'space' into 'place'?

Methodology

The use of a qualitative approach and the method of analysis

This project employed a mix of qualitative data collection methods including an electronically administered survey, analysis of the students' reflective journals and observation (and analysis via logged transcripts) of day-to-day life in the MOO. The qualitative approach was particularly appropriate for this project, as Schunk suggests 'Qualitative research is especially useful when researchers are interested in the structure of events rather than the overall distributions, when the meanings and perspectives of individuals are important, but actual experiments are impractical or unethical, and when a desire to search for new potential causal linkages that have not been discovered by experimental methods exists' (2000, p. 5). The particular data gathering methods employed were chosen because they were not intrusive in the environment and therefore unlikely to disrupt the students learning processes or day-to-day life in the MOO. These methods were most appropriate for this project because the task of understanding the significance of community for this group of students involved interpreting their understanding of how student life worked, what role the social interactions they participated in and experienced in the MOO had in developing social learning support networks, and for attributing meaning to the social interactions observed in the online learning environments in which they studied. These methods provided a rich mix of data that represented both the students' actions in the MOO and their reflections on their experiences. After the analysis of the students' journals and of the logged transcripts of day-to-day life in the MOO, a set of questions arose regarding some specific incidents in the MOO and it was decided that the best way to explore these issues would be via a qualitative survey using a mix of closed and open-ended questions. The survey was emailed to the students at the end of the course, with six of the twelve students participating in the research responding.

The method used to analyse the data gathered in this project was informed by Neuman's Successive Approximation model and the QSR Nvivo qualitative data analysis software was used to process the data. Neuman's (2000) model involves the researcher starting with a set of questions, concepts or ideas to explore, an initial set of data is gathered and repeatedly analysed. The QSR Nvivo qualitative data analysis software was particularly useful in this process as it allowed for the easy coding and recoding of data over subsequent passes, and facilitated the integrating of coding sets across the different types of data sets collected (logged text, journals and surveys). All three sets of data were coded for comments, actions or interactions relating to the 'environment', 'supported each others learning', 'incidental contact', and 'communication etiquette'. From these initial codes the data was recoded and further coding categories added, resulting in seventeen codes after successive passes through the data. These categories explored issues such as anonymity, the written medium, emotions, identity, work-life-study balance, timing, humour-play, and students' comments on the difference between this environment and on campus study. These coded sets then formed the basis of the four interrelated categories outlined in the findings.

Findings of this case study

The findings of this case study can be reported via four interrelated categories: what were students' expectations of building a community and was it important to them (Students' expectations); how did students behave in the MOO, how was this behaviour modelled and what effect did the MOO environment itself have on their interactions (Behaviour in the MOO); how did these students turn the MOO space into a place (Space into Place); and what evidence was there of this space providing a community for some or all of the students (Examples of community in action).

Students' expectations

Students' expectations of becoming a community were mixed. Interestingly those students that were more experienced in the online, virtual world environment (those that had previously participated in other MOO's or experienced chat facilities) had a higher expectation of developing connections with fellow students. Typical examples of students' comments list below illustrate this ambivalence about the prospects of developing a sense of community and the possible reasons why this might be:

I do not have much expectations since we hardly get to chat online and offline. I just suppose we will be casual friends. The hi-bye friend if you know what i mean.:)This I presume is due to the minimal contact we have with one another. (Participant A)

I didn't really expect to make much of a connection with most of the people because i generally connect with people who i have had shared experiences with / they have helped me / i have helped them. (Participant B)

My expectations of creating lasting friendships were not high. This was due to the brief length of the course (Participant E)

I didn't really expect to make any strong connections or friendships with any one. I thought the class would o been more of a questions and answer type class not an actual virtual community as such. (Participant M)

The is in contrast to Participant W who is an experienced virtual environment user:

I was definitely hoping to make some online friends, and i think i managed to achieve this. Whether or not the feeling is mutual is dependant on the other person. I enjoy meeting new people and seeing what experiences they have had, and in an online community, people tend to be less worried about talking about themselves, and usually you learn alot more about them then in any other situation. (Participant W)

This course, unlike a core course studied within a set program, is offered as an elective to students from a wide variety of disciplines. As there is no 'student cohort' relating to a specific program it is reasonable to assume that students wouldn't have a high expectation of developing a community as the investment in developing the connections with each other probably outweigh the perceived benefits, given students would be unlikely to continue formal contact after the completion of this course. This is born out in the comments above. This coupled with the fact that students' identities are assumed (so not even basic factors such as gender and age may be accurate) and that the course expressly forbids students from contacting or meeting up with each other outside of the course MOO until the final week (in order to maintain and provide the appropriate environment to explore their chosen identity), are all likely to have contributed to students' low expectations about developing a community while studying in the MOO. The fact that those students, already experienced in relating to others in virtual worlds, had a higher expectation of developing a sense of connection suggests that their previous experiences in MOO's or chat type of environments meant that the factors relating to identity were possibly not as significant in the development of trust between students as discussed. Another factor in this may have been that these more experienced students brought a sense of play into the MOO almost immediately, this seemed important in the modelling of behaviour and ensured they started to get 'known' very early on.

However, even though most students' expectations of developing a community were low, when questioned on the value of community or as the survey termed it 'social learning support networks' all respondents clearly believed that the development of social connections that enabled them to seek or provide support to each other were important elements of student life and supported their learning processes. The following are typical of students' responses:

I do. Interaction at least is important otherwise you may as well read a book at home. by sharing study and a subject with people who are doing the same thing, different viewpoints are seen. also, people doing the same subjects often have the same interests. (Participant B)

Yes i do feel that friendships and connection with other students is very important. I wouldn't be able to study if i didn't have this connection, as it provides me with support and a balance. (Participant M)

I think it is, as whilst lecturers are available for help, students are normally ur first line of defence. If anything goes wrong, I tend to talk to my fellow classmates, online or offline before going to the lecturer. This can be noted by the day that an assignment was due. Everyone was online offering help to everyone else. (Participant W)

In the day to day discussions within the MOO most students were perplexed when the concept of a community in a learning setting was raised, however when the concept of social learning support networks - the idea that they might get and give support to each other and how such a sense of trust might develop, all agreed that they had experienced this in the on-campus environment and most had started to experience something of this in the MOO. The apparent inconsistency between the students' acceptance of the abstract term such as 'community' as opposed to the concrete concept of 'social learning support networks' is an interesting one. As authors from various disciplines have suggested, the term 'community' has become so over used that it appears to have almost become meaningless (Bauman, 2001, Bryson and Mowbray, 1981, Lemos, 1996), it is only when the concrete elements of what this term might mean in practice are clarified, that the idea of being a member of a community, in this case a learning community, has some appeal. The concept of community and the concrete elements assumed by that label has always been utilitarian in nature. While, as Bauman suggests, this concept has almost been romanticised into oblivion, individuals still recognise the practice and practical elements incumbent in this term and the utility or capacity building benefits for those who are members of such communities (Bauman, 2001). Interestingly the experienced online students often became the initiators of social connection between students, in that they were the students most likely to log into the MOO and just hang around, even if no one else was logged in. This meant that when other users checked out who was in the MOO before logging in, they found someone there and therefore logged in to say hello. These students seemed to innately understand the value of incidental or informal meetings between students in the development of connections with each other. This modelling of behaviour was an important factor in the development of a relaxed and informal social environment or culture within the MOO.

Behaviour in the MOO

In unfamiliar spaces or situations people pick up cues on how to act from others inhabiting a space, this is just as true in cyberspace. Cognisant of this the two teaching and one technical staff members of this course pre-planned how they would model a relaxed, informal and helpful environment. The technical staff member was particularly crucial in this regard. It was standard practice for the technical staff member to be logged in most days in the first few weeks of the course. The technical staff member had chosen a non-gendered identity specifically to challenge the sense that one should have a gender and was available to assist with technical issues and enquiries from students about how to use the internal MOO mail system, how to create their identities, how to create objects to furnish their rooms, how to create objects to carry around, etc. The teaching staff chose non-human, but gendered identities and constantly modelled playful, informal behaviour.

The three teaching staff also established communication norms and etiquette by modelling appropriate acknowledgment and greetings or farewells whenever a student entered or left a room. Importantly they also modelled moving around the MOO, enhancing students' sense of place by walking with them

through the foyers and courtyards into the seminar rooms, chatting along the way, commenting of the change of weather in Tokyo or on a picture on the wall or on the smell of coffee emanating from the cafe. Staff created the social spaces and their own offices in a way that established a warm and inviting culture. The following is an example of the café:

Orange Blossom Cafe: As your eyes adjust to the lighting inside, you see old octagonal wooden tables and bentwood chairs on polished floorboards at one end, and at the other, a lounge area with deep leather couches grouped around low tables. A fireplace flickers with gently smouldering logs, and the scent of pine smoke mingles beautifully with the good smells of cooking and freshly brewed coffee. The room is divided into separate areas by large planters filled with red, pink and white flowering anthuriums, which makes each small group of chairs and tables feel cosy and intimate. A waiter greets you at the door and motions you to an empty table in a most hospitable manner.

The use of humour was an important factor in the development of connections between people and to create an informal and relaxed environment. Once this behaviour was modelled by the teaching and technical staff in the general MOO environment, it was reinforced in the three real time, virtual conferences held in the MOO. One example of this playful culture was the development of an object (a Magical bag of Grapes) by one of the more experienced students. The object (the bag of grapes) was carried around by people (and sometimes left in conference rooms etc), whoever had the bag could offer a fellow MOO inhabitant a grape, when the other person 'eat grape' they would receive a randomly generated response. Examples of these responses included:

Surfgrrrl takes a over-ripe brown grape from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a russet brown sultana grape from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a kiwifruit from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a leathery old prune from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a small sweet yellow grape from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a tightly packed bunch of black grapes from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a pair of leopard skin underpants from the bag and munches into it.
Surfgrrrl takes a packet of ribbed condoms from the bag and munches into it.

The response, particularly the more distasteful ones, generated laughter from those around and several games developed, including Russian roulette with Grapes. Objects such as this and the myriad of other items people created to express who they were in the MOO, all served to facilitate discussion between inhabitants and to develop a sense of connection between people via the incidental sharing of information that occurred once people had started to spend more time with each other. Once students became familiar with the environment they related informally. Interestingly some people developed very strong emotional connections with each other and discussed deeply personal issues. This included people sharing personal experiences of starting relationships online, having affairs and discussing current relationship difficulties.

The environment of the MOO was particularly useful in facilitating this type of personal sharing because of the segregated nature of the space (people in one room can not hear what is going on in another room), the design qualities built into some objects used in the MOO (some lounge chairs were designed so that only those actually sitting on the chair could hear the conversations of others on the chair) and the real time or synchronous nature of the discussion (when two students bumped into each other in the MOO and had a conversation it existed only between them, rather than being available for others to look through as with a bulletin board).

Space into Place

Using the previously discussed framework of Burbules (2000), the MOO *space* became *place* because of those factors discussed including the modelling of behaviour as an informal environment, the capacity for MOO inhabitants to create, alter and transform a space (to leave their finger prints on it, to design it and redesign it over again), and due to the synchronous nature of the interaction (the capacity for people to bump into each other in real time). Some of the students Dorm rooms were good examples of the interplay of these factors. The more experienced students created elaborate rooms with detailed objects, outlooks and some even created maze like alternative exit paths from their rooms back into other spaces

in the MOO. These areas really became spaces in which people could play and bump into each other. The value of this capacity for informal meeting within the MOO space cannot be overstated. This was particularly evident when students were questioned about their logging in behaviour. In particular whether they first checked to see if anyone else was logged in before they logged in. All said that, unless they had a specific reason for logging in (to complete some set task, etc) they usually performed the @who command at the login screen to establish if anyone else was in the MOO. As such the practice of the more experienced students of logging on in the morning and staying logged on for long periods of time meant that many fellow students logged in just to say hi and have a chat. It would not be unusual to log in and find two or three students just chatting about the day's events (social, political or course related) or exploring other spaces in the MOO. Towards the end of semester the students' activities included playing jokes on other students and the teaching staff by moving objects around, filling peoples offices with objects, etc. These practices all contributed to the environment becoming an inhabited place.

Examples of community in action

The numerous meetings between individuals, the playing of games and practical jokes, the partying and dancing at the end of the set conferences and the sharing of personal stories all provide evidence of the community that the students of CTXT1379: Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace created. However, a clear example of this community or social learning support networks in action was the use of the MOO by students who felt under pressure or isolated. Towards the end of semester students were reminded by one of the staff team of an assignment due the following day. Several students spontaneously chose to log into the MOO and spend several hours together, while completing their assignments at home. The assignment did not require collaboration between them to complete, rather they simply supported each other with humour and encouraged each other to complete the project. The feeling of social presence was so strong within this group that they effectively chose to just 'hang out together' while they worked. Students often cited this night, and other similar nights, as examples of their community and the type of support they received from each other in their journals. When questioned about that specific night in the survey those students that had logged in that night discussed the reasons why:

I can't really remember if I log in one day before the assignment is due (or that night). But i did log in every time an assignment is due. I expect to find more information or would just like to confirm with other people i might meet if the assignment is really due or is there a new information regarding the assessment etc. It's just to let myself feel more at ease, knowing that i have been doing the right thing. (Participant A)

I logged in because I was finalising my journal and figured I would catch up with everyone else online. also, the criteria for some of the work was pretty lose so i was looking to see if anyone had any tips for the assignment. ie i logged in to make sure i was doing the right thing and to collaborate on the assignment. (Participant B)

My main reason was that I had absolutely no idea of what was required of us to do in the assignment. ... All those online those nights were there to discuss ideas on what was required for the assignment. ... The MOO was a meeting point, and when I logged on, I remember just hoping to find other ppl in there. (Participant E)

I logged in because i was always logged in. But it was also because there was a chance someone would be online that was in the same situation. We could then bounce ideas of each other to get a solution. It was also good to see that other people were in the same situation as you.. So i guess, mostly for support. (Participant W)

It is clear from these comments that the virtual space created in the MOO became the *place* for some students to head in times of uncertainty and when in need of support.

Conclusions

The findings from this research are significant not only because they confirm the value of learning communities for online students but also because they call into question the reliance on CMS to deliver a holistic online learning environment, one which incorporates and values the social aspects of a student's life as well as providing the 'classroom'. While there is a need for further research in this area, this project provides evidence of the type of support provided by synchronous environments, which students gravitated to during times of stress and isolation, often just hanging out together online while working at home. The relationships these students developed took time and relied on the informal or incidental meetings that occurred in the MOO. These informal meetings provided students with the opportunity to share personal information with each other and develop the type of trust relationships that informed their more detailed sharing of personal experiences during the formal conference sessions. The capacity for this type of virtual environment to create an online campus, a *place* in which students have the opportunity to engage with each other in the day-to-day business of being students, would seem to provide a greater capacity for the development of ongoing student communities than single course module or CMS social spaces. The challenge for developers of future online learning environments will be to create whole online campuses that allow for the nuances of student life, including both their social interaction and their formal learning processes.

References

- Bauman, Z. (2001) *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for quality learning at university*, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Bryson, L. and Mowbray, M. (1981) 'Community': the spray-on solution', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 16, (4), 255 - 267,
- Burbules, N. C. (2000) 'Does the Internet constitute a Global Educational Community', In *Globalization and education: critical perspectives* (Eds, Burbules, N. C. and Torres, C. A.) Routledge, New York, pp. 323-355.
- Clark, S. (1999) 'Overcoming Barriers To Creating On-Line Communities' In Responding to diversity: The 16th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) Brisbane.
- Clodius, J. (1994). 'Concepts of Space and Place in a Virtual Community', Internet, 02/08, <http://dragonmud.org/people/jen/space.html>
- Conrad, D. (2002) 'Deep in the Hearts of Learners: Insights into the Nature of Online Community', *Journal of Distance Education*, 17, (1), <http://cade.athabasca.ca/vol17.1/conrad.html>.
- Grabe, M. and Grabe, C. (2001) *Integrating Technology for Meaningful Learning*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.
- Gunawardena, C., Plass, J. and Salisbury, M. (2001) 'Do we really need an online discussion group?' In *Online learning and teaching with technology: case studies, experience and practice* (Eds, Murphy, D., Walker, R. and Webb, G.) Kogan Page, London, pp. 36-43.
- Harris, L. (in press) 'Just bumping into people - or an opportunity to create a learning community? The role of incidental social interaction in the development of a learning community.' RMIT University Press, Melbourne.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lemos, A. (1996) 'The Labyrinth of Minitel', In *Cultures of Internet: Virtual spaces, real histories, living bodies* (Ed, Shields, R.) Sage, London, pp. 33-48.
- McInnis, C. (2001). 'Signs of Disengagement? The Changing undergraduate experience in Australian Universities', Web pdf of Inaugural Professorial Lecture 13 August 2001, 21/08/2001, http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/downloads/InaugLec23_8_01.pdf

- McPherson, M., Nunes, M. B. and Harris, L. (2002) 'It Is An Inertia Thing, No-One Uses It, So No-One Uses It: The Failure Of A Virtual Social Space (Vss) Intended To Create A Learning Community', In *Winds of Change in the Sea of Learning: Proceedings of the 19th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education*, Vol. 1 (Eds, Williamson, A., Gunn, C., Young, A. and Clear, T.) UNITEC Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, pp. 461-470.
- Neuman, W. L. (2000) *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*, Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, MA.
- Nunes, M. B., McPherson, M., Firth, C. and Gilchrist, D. (2002) In *International Conference on Computers in Education (ICCE'02)* Auckland, New Zealand.
- Palloff, R. M. and Pratt, K. (1999) *Building learning communities in cyberspace: effective strategies for the online classroom*, Jossey-Bass Inc, San Francisco.
- Ragan, L. C. (1998) 'Good teaching is good teaching: an emerging set of guiding principles and practices for the design and development of distance education.' *DEOSNEWS*, 8, (12),
- Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Routledge, London.
- Schunk, D. H. (2000) *Learning Theories: an educational perspective*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.
- Tinto, V. (2000) 'Learning better together : the impact of learning communities on student success in higher education.' *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9, (1), 48-53,
- Wheatley, G. H. (1991) 'Constructivist Perspectives on Science and Mathematics Learning', *Science Education*, 75, (1), 9-21,

Copyright © 2003 Lisa Harris

The author(s) assign to ASCILITE and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to ASCILITE to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) and in printed form within the ASCILITE 2003 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).