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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of the electronic community and its conversation for educators. Highlights include: (1) connections in electronic communities, including listservs, World Wide Web-based discussion groups, and the "conversational web"; (2) cyber-collaborative learning, including virtual classrooms, developing student writing skills, and collaboration among educators; (3) social development within the electronic community, including virtuality and postmodernism; (4) electronic community and hypertext conversation, including the chaos of non-linear asynchronous communication; (5) the individual and the community, including advantages of non-linearity for advancing critical thinking skills and allowing greater flexibility in understanding curriculum; and (6) conversational nuance and beyond, including conveying emotion and miscommunication/misunderstanding. (AEF)

A Theoretical Look at Electronic Community's

Conversation and Curriculum

by
Curtis R. Rogers

August 7, 1998.

Curricula are primarily constructed by curriculum specialists working for school districts or with individual schools. In some states curriculum frameworks are handed down from the state's department of education for use in K-12 schools. Somewhere in the process of curriculum construction, a great fissure erupts between practitioners and administrators and into that fissure falls what may possibly be the most important facet of curriculum development for an Information Age: the electronic community and its conversation.

Educators must learn to manipulate technology to build community and a conversation within a community to teach today's computer-savvy students. The Information Age is replacing the Industrial Age, and educators must change too. I am not proclaiming educators follow a curriculum of technology on a cart and simply have students play on the Internet or only utilize the World Wide Web for its research capabilities. I ask that educators choose well-developed educator technology training courses and actually join listservs or electronic discussion groups, interact as community members in an on-going chat room, or surf the Web for WBI (Web based instruction) tools to use in and outside the physical classroom.

Educators must learn to deal with change first, then concentrate on learning the technology basics. Educator training opportunities are plentiful and educators must learn to link technology to the conversation of a community of learners to support their curricula. The Information Age is almost here and the paradigm shift will take place with or without us. What connections to the

student's world must educators make? How can educators better utilize the electronic community for curriculum?

Connections

By making connections through my own experiences in electronic communities and how I perceive others make sense of electronic communities, I am able to develop assumptions of how building an electronic community can support the curriculum. The connections between personal experience and learned behavior are important to understand but we must also make connections to previously theorized phenomena for a basis upon which to build a foundation. For instance, a concept of the mind for educational psychologists attempting to comprehend how physical connections are made for understanding, Kliebard states: "For Thorndike ... the human mind was a machine with thousands, indeed, millions of individual connections, each containing a message which may have no logical relationship with other messages" (Pinar p.92). Thorndike makes the relationship of how connections in the mind are made with no logical association which relates to how nonlinear and convoluted the conversation of an electronic community becomes with its development. The electronic community is a complex river of conversation composed of individual conversations that may or may not have any relationship to one another. This multi-layered complexity of how thought is initiated and manipulated within the human mind and the mind's relationship to conversation within the electronic community are pivotal to the relationships between the notions of understanding one's physical world and perceptions of how the electronic or virtual world may exist.

Upon re-entering graduate study in the field of Curriculum Studies, I vaulted my consciousness, both physical and psychological, into an educational technology frenzy of

listservs and web based discussion groups. Do they actually support the curriculum or only add another time consuming dimension to the workload? I am constantly challenged to question my presuppositions they support the curriculum via additional venues for community building and cyber-conversation therefor augmenting a continuous conversation for a course's duration which may last well after the course's end.

One example is that of a web discussion group centering around curriculum leadership. During a semester long course in curriculum leadership, guided by the scholarship of our professor, my classmates and I created an electronic community built upon intellectual conversation surrounding the coursework and physical synchronous classroom conversation. Participation was required of all students. Through the additional asynchronous electronic community conversation (conversation becomes asynchronous in an electronic community because it is not taking place within any specific temporal constraints), we were able to create auxiliary supporting connections through personal experience and the concurrent study which may only irregularly occur within the physical presence of a classroom framework.

By the course's end, we had conversed almost twice as much as we would have without the existence of our electronic community. We were able to explore each other's knowledge base as it related to our subject. We had experienced the construction of a strongly interwoven electronic community. By agreeing, disagreeing, constructively criticizing each other's positions and reacting among the web postings, we learned not only from our professor, but we also learned from one another and our professor learned from us. Via this mode of collateral learning, we were able to make connections outside the physical classroom walls with each other's feelings, expressions of erudition and experiential nuances that without the supplemental electronic conversation may not have taken place.

After the course was concluded, a few of the students, including myself, felt compelled to lurk in the next semester's web discussion group. We were able to witness a complex and mystifying change. One student apparently dismayed with the course content aggressively utilized the Web discussion group to protest the teachings. The verbiage and conveyed malicious intent by one student created a situation in which others did not appear as compelled to interact within this external electronic community. Even though we were no longer a part of the physical community, we could infer from the electronic community's conversation that the physical class was now a hostile environment. This is an example of how the electronic community's conversation can convey emotion and ideas without having access to the physical community. It also presents the problem of not fully understanding what the dynamics are within the physical community. What appears to be a problem from reading the electronic conversation may or may not exist within the physical community. This is why educators should not rely on only an electronic means of communication, but on the combination of both electronic and physical for full understanding.

By creating a conversation within the virtual community students are able to visit one another's views and perceptions as they relate to specific subject matter while simultaneously making connections between the physical world and electronic communities in which conversation exists. In the example above, I was able to discover that the electronic community can also be a vehicle to promote agendas thereby making the connections to the curriculum for the educator and students as they relate to the subject matter more difficult to discern. This conversation, if kept in tact by the educator moderator, builds and strengthens the electronic community into what I consider a "conversational web".

A "conversational web" consists of the knowledge of conversation both in their physical and virtual forms. This web is different for all learners and adds to their experiential learning process through the integration of technology in and outside the classroom. Educators must promote and actively facilitate the use of supplemental electronic community communication to move toward the demands of a curriculum for the Information Age. For example, I am both a physical and virtual community member for a class I am currently taking. In the physical community, I am able to contribute to the conversation, interact with fellow students on a physical level and possibly understand their point of views in a discussion by my interpretation of their body language. This is only one side of the conversation. Away from the physical class, I interact with my fellow classmates in an electronic community conversation. In addition to the physical conversation, I continue to learn new concepts not discussed in class about the readings and interact through written language with other students. All of these conversations combined create a conversational web because we begin to blend the physical and virtual conversation into something that we understand for ourselves.

Also, I must take into consideration how I descry educators make sense of electronic communities so they may think critically for curriculum development in an Information Age. Do not make use of an electronic community only as a supplemental exercise to support time spent outside the physical classroom, but facilitate and moderate conversation to promote critical subject matter thinking and expression through writing. If educators do not grasp that conversation within an electronic community promotes their curriculum or supplements it then we have little need for it. By what process can educators understand that both the physical and virtual conversations promotes their curriculum?

Educators should take into consideration that electronic communities in which students interact with one another's ideas relating their experiences to the subject matter will move society into a more productive age of students who will actively participate in more complete conversations versus the minimal amount of conversation preexistent in the physical classroom. Each educator as well as student must learn collaboratively for this process to be a success.

Cyber-collaborative Learning

To better understand the process by which curriculum can be developed and supplemented through electronic community conversation, we must gain a more fully explicative understanding of the aspects of what I term "cyber-collaborative learning".

The physical classroom community presents a problem: a lack of collaborative learning. To understand what learners not only want to learn but also learning in a way that is related to their everyday lives, curriculum constructors must rely on a process of understanding related to "cyber-collaborative learning". A tool being left by the wayside or being poorly utilized by educators to help define new forms of curricula is that of the electronic community's conversation.

Curriculum developers should embrace technology as a supplement to the educational and cyber-collaborative learning process and not view it as a replacement for educating. James B. Macdonald states, "I propose that the structure of the world environment today must be approached through the existence of a nuclear, electronic-computerized, multimedia technology rather than the more linear, single-media machine world" (Sears, Chapter 6). We have in effect the ability to transform our classrooms from simply physical into both physical and virtual,

thereby extending the educator's reach and learner's realms of understanding subject matter through conversation.

All curricula have a place in which electronic community may be incorporated. From middle school math classes to graduate study in foreign language, the cyber-collaborative learning process can be strengthened by the creation of electronic community's conversation. Educators may be able to gain further ground with students who are verbally noncommunicative. By this I mean that students who are shy, vocally disabled or unable to form thought through immediate responsive interpersonal communication now have a supplemental mechanism in the form of an electronic community. However, educators must also deal with the problem of students who do not write well enough to be able to express themselves within the electronic community. An additional handicap may lie in the student's inability to type and lack of vocabulary for written expression. As a method for developing writing skills, the electronic community much like journaling can play an important role. Bonnie Meath-Lang works with deaf children and uses dialogue journals to support the curriculum by forming writing communities: "I have argued that the formation of writing communities through dialogue journals results, in effect, in reconceiving the curriculum; for student and teacher writing - and writing acts - become the curriculum" (Pinar, p.531). By replacing dialogue journals with the electronic community, educators can work with students who do not have the writing ability for electronic community interaction by working with them individually but through an electronic medium. Email messages could be used for individual interaction electronically and from these email messages and other forms of electronic conversation, the curriculum will appear.

Cyber-collaboration among educators within an electronic community is also needed. Educators tend to be solitary in the teacher community but as James B. Macdonald asserts,

"Curriculum thinking should be grounded in cultural realities..." (Sears, Chapter 6). To grasp the intricacies of conversation in the electronic community, not only should educators work together to understand the language of technology, but also they must experience the virtualness of the electronic community by becoming active members. Students grow up surrounded by technology but most educators have not. Technology has created a new culture of electronic learners in which educators have become displaced. The cultural reality is that virtual community conversation does exists in the lives of the Information Age generation and in that reality lies the process by which curriculum thinking for the Information Age learner dwells. Educators must place themselves in this emerging electronic culture so that they can understand how the present generation learns. Elliot Eisner points out: All of us who work in schools, whether elementary schools or universities, work and live within a culture. This culture functions as an organic entity that seeks stability yet reacts to changes in one part from changes made in others. We need to try to understand these interactions if we seek intelligently to bring about significant change in schools (Sears, Chapter 7).

Educators must learn to collaborate with one another but invariably have little time to accomplish this enriching responsibility. Educators who do not communicate with one another perpetuate a certain reproduction of complacency in the curriculum status quo. A stale curriculum will not satisfy the educational needs of Information Age learners.

Collaboration and understanding the self must be related to teacher education especially when dealing with foreign concepts such as the electronic community's conversation. "Hargraves and Fullan (1992) identify three major areas of teacher development: 1) knowledge and skill development, 2) self-understanding, and 3) ecological change, including peer coaching and collaborative change" (Pinar, p764). Combining this thought process with the Taoist connection

presented by Wen-Song Hwu (Pinar, p. 492) I immediately began thinking of how curriculum, in general, could relate to Hinduism and this complancency in reproduction and the need for collaborative change. One of the basic precepts in Hinduism is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In this is represented a cycle of reincarnation where the human soul is carried over and over and is called samsara. The evolutionary process of samsara by which humans become enlightened and over the seemingly endless cycle attempt to reach moksha which is liberation from samsara. Moksha (more popularly known as nirvana in Buddhism) is the end of reincarnation and when this enlightenment is reached, the individual has reached an egoless state with complete disregard for personal existence and only oneness with God.

Every year, teachers enter their classrooms at the end of summer, ready for the new school year to begin. They make sure that everything is in line and prepare for new students' arrival. Each new year brings new challenges, problems, and hopefully solutions. The semester, or term begins almost with a clean slate. Some problems and solutions are carried over into the next year and are dealt with appropriately. Sometimes, teachers wait for them to happen before actually dealing with them head on. After five or six years of teaching, they begin to see themselves just doing the same routine over and over sometimes with little or no hope for the "end of the tunnel".

The cycle of birth (beginning of the school term), death (ending of the school term), and rebirth (the next school term's beginning) can be represented as samsara. As educators, we need to improve each year not only in our professional lives, but also in our personal lives to reach a more enlightened state of educating. Disregarding the self or entering an egoless phase, or moksha, or better yet, just striving for this ultimate oneness may create the ultimate democratic classroom in which an electronic community conversation can begin. If we as educators could

attempt to go beyond the ego and be one with our students, see the world through their eyes, experience their community by walking in their shoes and experiencing their cultural realities, we can have a better understanding of their world for which we are supposedly preparing them. How can we adequately prepare them for a world of which we are not a part? How can we adequately operate within the confines of a democratic classroom without creating this oneness? I believe this striving, through whatever positive personal methods, to better ourselves, understand ourselves, then go beyond ourselves by striving for the educational moksha, can we then democratically educate others utilizing supplemental technologies for the Information Age learner.

Through structured technology teacher education which incorporates the principles of electronic community communication, educators will be able to educate each other whether it be in their specific subject matter or for personal technological advancement to project a solid understanding of these actual existent cultural realities.

Social Development Within the Electronic Community

Does the lack of physical presence in communication have an effect on the outcomes of conversation? Does observation of others in group settings such as a classroom have an effect on conversation? Does hearing the physical voices within a community's conversation effect understanding and interpretation? These questions are pivotal to understanding the crux of the problem with which many educators will confront my position supporting electronic community building to support and supplement curricula.

Socially, we develop community based on many factors that include physical presence. To understanding the problems associated with lack of physical presence in an electronic

community, I propose that an electronic community only be created and utilized as a supplement to the curriculum, not a replacement. Virtual universities, virtual classrooms and virtual communities are simply that: virtual. In fact, the word virtual has taken on a new meaning within the computer/technology world. Virtual relates to a computer based replacement for or representation of the real.

Postmodernism brings to curriculum the sense of new age ideas and takes into account how new paradigm shifts may be perceived or conceptualized. William Doll introduces his project by proposing that the 'megaparadigmatic' changes that postmodernism is bringing to all the disciplines will dramatically affect the curriculum, the confluence of many disciplines, to such an extent that a 'new sense of educational order will emerge, as will new relations between teachers and students, culminating in a new concept of curriculum.' This new order will be more complex, pluralistic, and unpredictable (Pinar, p.498). The electronic community is gradually bringing about new concepts of curriculum. The conversation is currently taking place and the virtual conversation is influencing curriculum by creating this external conversation.

In the virtaulity of electronic community conversation we can only come close to replicating physical community communication. However virtual a community can be, it is only a representation or continuation of the physical community. Supplemental to the physical community is the place where virtual electronic community should inhere. By interacting on both the virtual and physical conversation levels presented in these new forms of community, educators and learners alike will continually create, redefine, and determine the unlimited complexity of boundaries of curriculum for an Information Age.

Electronic Community and Hypertext Conversation

Another approach to the production of electronic community conversation must take into account the hypertextual nature that forms the individual's interpretation of conversation. Only by experiencing the community in its electronic existence, theorists can then attempt to understand its complexities.

One such theorist, Jean-Francois Lyotard, expressed the hypothesis, "that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Sears, Chapter 8). Lyotard set the stage for the present explanations of understanding language through electronic community conversation. In the Information Age, the transformation of learning from wrote to experiential must take place to move the educational society along with the rest of society's language that is becoming based in an electronic format. Lyotard also specified his understanding of language for the post-modern age as, "the 'leading' sciences and technologies—cybernetics, telematics, informatics, and the growth of computer languages—are all significantly language based and have transformed the two principle functions of knowledge: research and the transmission of acquired learning" (Sears, Chapter 8, italics in original). This transmission of acquired learning is in constant flux. From its chaotic hypertextual language, the electronic community's conversation can be the carrier for this transmission described by Lyotard.

As chaotic as the conversation of non-linear asynchronous communication may seem, from within that perceived chaos can we actually begin to witness the emanation of thoughts and sources for curriculum development from both the virtual and physical community conversation. Expressly through this transformation of conversation can we utilize its product for enhancing

curriculum. Kathleen Hayles noted, It can be generally understood as the study of complex systems, in which ... nonlinear problems are considered in their own right.... Chaos is seen as order's precursor and partner.... The focus is on the spontaneous emergence of self-organization from chaos (Pinar, p.500). To further illustrate this point of view, please continue reading this paper's section in hypertext form at http://www.conterra.com/crr/meta.html. By experiencing hypertext in conjunction with reading this paper, the reader will have a more complete understanding of this conversational medium.

The Individual and the Community

Many educators may assume the non-linearity of asynchronous communication does not create a sense of community. I offer that the non-linearity of asynchronous conversation affords a more broadly based sense of communication within a preexisting community such as that of the physical classroom. Conversation becomes non-linear in an asynchronous electronic community (such as web posting based or bulletin board based discussion groups) thus allowing for more analysis and a more involved commitment to creating the conversation. Critical thinking skills are intrinsically advanced due to time spent on reflection. This non-linearity will allow for greater flexibility for understanding curriculum in the Information Age. An example of this thought process is presented: Curriculum, as a dynamic mediating interface between public knowledge and the learner, would, as a result, represent knowledge in a nonlinear mode. Knowledge representation would become flexible and the cognitive load amenable to change during the learning process. Knowledge would be conveyed via multimedia devices, organizational would be modular and defined by bits, frames, and slots, while instruction would

be constantly monitored (Pinar, p.715). The non-linear mode of knowledge can be represented in the conversations of an electronic community of educators and learners.

Some may reason it is more engaging to hear the physical voices and see body language of each speaker and that synchronous electronic communication as experienced in real time online chat builds a more integral sense of social presence. Gaining insight from vocal inflection, detecting nervousness in stammer and understanding through physical nonvocal language are all important for the conversation to be a productive conversation. Again, electronic community conversation can only be a supplement to the physical. The virtual university will not and should not attempt to replace the real.

Many librarians feared that the Internet would replace the book. It has not happened and will not happen as long as sentient beings want to bring physicality to comprehension as a mechanism for learning and understanding. Can we learn enough from each other from chat rooms, listservs, and discussion groups? No. We can learn partially employing this method but must combine the two spaces (cyber and physical) for integral comprehension.

I teach classes to adult learners (most of whom work in libraries) how to use the Internet for reference work. When I teach them I like to try and treat them as a group, yet spend a few moments with them as they surf during their hand's on exercises. Each has a unique approach to learning the Web and for each, a different process of an attempt to derive stability from it's chaos must exist. They are, as a group, library personnel, and to that their community norms are expressed. I tell them that for librarians this process for information retrieval is particularly difficult because librarians like organization which is the antithesis of the Web. Simultaneously we need to know how to manipulate the Web for information retrieval. Through community, a group of librarians sharing the same ultimate goal of retrieving information for a customer,

individuality must be recognized because of the chaos found in the Web. Each user finds a personal way to manipulate the Web to find information and will rarely find the same information via the same method every time. This is what I promote when I teach them. They must gain a comfort level that is all their own. Each librarian will find a way that suits them but they can not stick with it for too long because of the volatility of the nature of this wonderful chaotic tool being searched daily. I make it a point to reiterate this ad nauseum so they'll understand that librarians now have to be the antithesis of their stereotype, flexible! This challenge I extend to all educators. Because of the non-linearity of the new information retrieval modes such as hypertext and the Web, educators must be flexible in creating and improvising for curriculum.

I look at each class and I really try not to see gender, race, or religion, but instead a community of learners who are also educators. Each one has a unique approach to information retrieval. Ironically, radical individualism has its place within the electronic community.

Conversational Nuance and Beyond

Much as with physical synchronous conversation, the feelings and emotion, representations of care, concern, nurturance, opposition and hatred, can all exist within an electronic community. It is important for educators to facilitate and convey these emotions or carry them over into the electronic community. Nel Noddings argues that "... education should nurture the special cognitive capacities or 'intelligence' of all children, and in so doing will want to utilize a scheme of multiple intelligences ..." (Pinar, p.695). This point then builds to the connections we must make for application of the electronic community conversation to build curriculum. Making the connection of emotions experienced within the physical classroom to

that of the non-physical must be first through writing. The multiple intelligences of the learner combined with those of the educator can cause a form of consciousness within the electronic community. The conversation allows these multiple intelligences to flourish and more fully develop through the time spent in self reflection of the conversation's written response and initiation of ideas.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding occur much more often within an electronic community's conversation especially in those that are non-linear and asynchronous. This is why it is of the utmost importance for educators to spend time moderating and facilitating the conversation. Educators should consistently ask questions of clarification to elucidate and interpret in a nurturing way. This process will not only build a stronger conversation within the electronic community, but will also carry over into the physical classroom's conversation.

Through expression using the written word within an electronic community's conversation, emotion must be conveyed in order for social development to occur. We cannot leave emotion by the wayside. Expressive writing techniques intrinsically develop through questioning community member's positions. We take with us the personal knowledge and experience of physical interaction to the electronic community to build an external emotional representation of the individuals with whom we now interact on the electronic level.

What is the importance of fully conveying a thought in the written word? For community members to achieve a more comprehensive depiction of one another's thoughts and ideas, a great deal of importance must be granted to detailed and revealing written assertions. This process is developed over time from experience within the electronic community. The "conversational web" narrows experientially and brings into being new forms of written communication.

Emoticons and word emphasis are examples of how the transmission of emotion occur in electronic writing. For example, "Do you understand my point of view? :-) " is depicted with a smiley offering amicable connotations; "Do YOU understand MY point of view?" is most likely interpreted as severe with emphasis or 'shouting' placed on words by capitalizing them; and "Do you understand my point of view... :-\ " with an ellipsis replacing a question mark and puzzled emoticon submits disparity. Utilization of these new forms of electronic community conversational writing can assist in conveying the appropriate emotional response or reaction within the conversation through visual stimulation and relative correlation to real emotional components.

Both synchronous and asynchronous conversation can be non-linear and create a multi-layered complexity of thoughts and ideas. Hypertextually developed conversation causes a temporal distortion within the context of an electronic community's conversation and creates a unique consciousness for each individual conversant. Combined with the physical conversation, this multi-layered complexity of expression can be reused toward a critical analysis of currently exercised curricula.

A process by which educators might create the conversation must always begin in the confines of the physical classroom. First, the physical conversation must include the announcement that Web based or bulletin board based discourse to supplement the curriculum will be used as part of the community's conversation. Second, an electronic community is technically created and members of the physical community are supplied with guidelines for its use and development to support a conversation surrounding the presented curricular objectives. Third, the electronic discussion takes shape in the form of a question and answer series initiated by the educator. The conversation begins electronically carrying with it knowledge of the

physicalities within the community. An electronic community's conversation always begins with a linear intent due to our innate perception of formed conversation, however it quickly becomes nonlinear when the members selectively project and respond within it. The hypertextual representations of specific thoughts take on this multi-layered complexity. This complexity then affords each subconversation its own uniqueness yet simultaneously allows for continuous revision and revisitation.

Directions educators can take toward creating an electronic community's conversation will vary greatly because each community of learners will have different goals. The physical and electronic conversation will in itself mold the curriculum and better prepare the educator for future curricular enhancement for the Information Age. Can we have both a physical and electronic conversation in an Information Age? We must. Educators definitely need to learn to operate in both worlds. "The emergence of the Internet, coupled with the rapid development of computerized communications, is leading to rapid and radical institutional changes from the workplace to the classroom" (Sears, Chapter 9). The world of the Information Age generation already exists in the eyes of that generation.

Educators must realize this change is taking place. The realization must be based in a process by which the learner's cultural realities (to include the electronic community) are understood, experienced, and utilized for the future curricula planning and development. By molding these two realities of this emerging societal shift, we will have in electronic conversation, a fluid and dynamic curriculum for the Information Age learner. "Ultimately, the common school of the modernist era will not simply be linked *into* cyberspace, it will *be* cyberspace. Schools and curriculum will cease to exist as we have know them since the days of Horace Mann" (Sears, Chapter 9, italics in original). Science fiction becomes fact. Electronic

community conversation is now fact. What educators can learn from it to create a dynamic curriculum based in the current cultural realities of learners *should* be fact.

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