

Looking For Social Capital in Online Virtual Communities

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether technology improves or enhances social capital, and whether genuine community can be established by using computers and the Internet. I will also explore why I feel the need to search for social capital. The topics that I will cover include definitions of social capital, definitions of virtual community, the potential drawbacks of virtual communities for developing social capital, and my personal reflections on the benefits of virtual communities and their relevance to my work setting.

I began my work on this paper with mixed feelings. On the one hand I was excited to validate my interest in using computers to establish professional bonds and relationships, but on the other hand, I was leery of the anonymity of the internet and worried that I might not be able to find substantive evidence that a person can develop real and lasting social connections through technology that will yield positive benefits in life. I am not even sure at this point that I need the social capital for which I search. Barry Wellman supports the notion of computer networks as being “inherently social networks, linking people, organizations, and knowledge” (2001, p. 1). Wellman is cautious, however, in observing “the proliferation of computer networks has facilitated a de-emphasis on group solidarities at work and in the community and afforded a turn to networked societies that are loosely bound and sparsely knit” (2001, p.1).

We live in a society where it is quite conceivable that we may not know our next-door neighbor’s name, yet we have the technology to be connected with people on the other side of the planet. With this power comes the need to understand what we should be doing to stay connected with our fellow human and what motivates us to stay connected. Should we be knocking on our neighbor’s door or should we find new ways to connect on-line? Wellman states “new tools must be developed to help people navigate and find knowledge in complex, fragmented, networked

societies” (2001, p. 1). But is it possible to find or even to identify these tools? I believe that social capital will not be easily found in virtual communities. With the rapid change in the social fabric of the World Wide Web and with the plethora of variables in the relationships that can be fostered strictly in cyberspace, can authentic social capital actually be accrued? It is to this dilemma that we now turn our attention.

Definitions Of Social Capital

Definitions of social capital vary widely, from highly institutional to highly personal in nature. Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) claim that “social capital is an imprecise social construct that has emerged from a rather murky swamp of terminology”, but point out that “it is still useful for exploring culture, society and social networks” (2003, p. 3). Sirianni and Friedland posit a basic definition of social capital when they say that

Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. Networks of civic engagement, such as neighborhood associations, sports clubs, and cooperatives, are an essential form of social capital, and the denser these networks, the more likely that members of a community will cooperate for mutual benefit. (1995, p. 1)

Francis Fukuyama, of George Mason University, notes that “social capital is important to the efficient functioning of modern economies”, and that it “constitutes the cultural component of modern societies” (1999, p. 1). He states, furthermore, that social capital is the sine qua non of a stable liberal democracy (1999). Fukuyama believes that “trust, networks, civil society, and the like” arise *as a result* of social capital, but do not constitute social capital itself (1999). He promotes his own definition of social capital in the following manner:

Social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals. The norms that constitute social capital can range from

a norm of reciprocity between two friends, all the way up to complex and elaborately articulated doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism. (1999, p. 1)

Fukuyama goes on to say that “not just any set of instantiated norms constitutes social capital; they must lead to cooperation in groups and therefore are related to traditional values like honesty, the keeping of commitments, reliable performances of duties, reciprocity, and the like” (1999, p. 2). This author, then, proposes the concept of the “radius of trust” and claims that “all groups embodying social capital have a certain radius of trust, that is, the circle of people among whom cooperative norms are operative” (1999, p. 2).

Miia Kosonen, PhD student at Lappeenranta University of Technology in Finland, studied the nature of social capital in virtual communities with the objective of finding out how the features of websites and the social processes described by their members could foster the development of social capital (2003). She states that “social capital resembles financial capital in such terms that it can be accumulated and members of the network can profit from it”, and that “social capital fosters the togetherness of community members and may encourage collaboration” (2003, p. 3). Kosonen concludes, simply, that “social capital is about trust, networks, norms of reciprocity and exchange of information” (2003, p. 3).

Ben Daniel states that social capital “is created when learners interact with each other in the community, by exchanging rich and thoughtful experiences among themselves through storytelling” (2002, p. 1). Daniel singles out the concept of trust as the “basis for building social capital in virtual learning environments”, and believes that “trust is then an enabler of social capital” (2002, p. 1). Daniel goes on to clarify the concept of social capital in simple terms when he says that

Social capital refers to the stock of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. While physical capital refers to physical objects, and human capital refers to properties of individuals such as knowledge, social capital implies connections among individuals and the value accrued from this connection. (2002, p. 5)

Daniel adds that “the notion of social capital suggests an abstract hidden resource, which can be accumulated, tapped, attained when people value relationships among each other, interact, collaborate, learn and share ideas” (2002, p. 5). Like Fukuyama, Daniel asserts that “trust is the driving element to the development of social capital”, and notes that social capital “cannot be cultivated quickly” (2002, p. 9).

Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) state that “social capital highlights the central importance of networks of strong personal relationships that develop over a period of time”, and that “these relationships provide a basis for trust, cooperation, and collective action” (p. 3). These authors point out that there is no single definition of social capital, but feel it is possible to classify the various definitions into the two categories of structural dimensions and content dimensions:

The structural dimension refers to the fundamental elements of the network such as types of ties and connections and the social organization of the community.
The content dimension of social capital includes the types of norms, trust, shared understanding and those variables that hold people together. (2003, p. 5)

Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla conclude then, that “social capital can be understood as a composite of different variables, each of which can be interpreted independently” (2003, p. 8). In terms of a working definition of social capital in virtual learning communities, these authors claim that social capital is “a common social resource that facilitates information exchange, knowledge sharing and knowledge construction through continuous interaction built on trust and maintained through shared understanding” (2003, p. 5).

Trust appears to be central to the understanding of social capital. As many have pointed out, trust does not develop quickly in human interactions. The benefits achieved through developing

this trust with others should be the goal of any community. It is not a given that one will develop social capital just because he or she is connecting with others online.

Definitions of Virtual Community

Similar to the varied definitions of social capital, the literature on virtual community contains no single, agreed upon definition of what constitutes a virtual community. Daniel comments that “the concept ranges from virtual community networks based on interests, virtual learning communities of relationships, place, ideas, reflection and ceremony, to communities of practice in the corporate world (2002, p. 3). Sharon Porterfield states that “the concept of a community as a place where people are bound together geographically has, with the advent of the world wide web (www), evolved into a concept referring to any group of individuals who socialize, whether it be face to face or through the use of technology” (2001, p. 1). Porterfield adds that “online communities are a gathering of people, in an online ‘space’ where they communicate, connect, and get to know each other better over time” (2001, p. 1).

Kosonen (2004) claims that “there is no accepted definition of community in social sciences, and thus it is no surprise that the term virtual has mixed the discussion even more” (p. 2). Kosonen notes, however, that “all virtual communities require some ‘group spirit’ to succeed; otherwise, they will disappear or become forgotten ghost towns” (2004, p. 1). Rheingold (2000) defines virtual communities as “social aggregations which emerge on the Net, when people carry on public discussions long enough to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. Fernback and Thompson (1995) regard virtual community as “a set of social relationships built in cyberspace through repeated contacts within a specified boundary”, and Preece (2000) identifies the following

four key elements of a virtual learning community: people, shared purpose, common policies, and information systems.

Schwier (2001) provides a comprehensive examination of virtual learning communities, and states, simply, that “virtual learning communities are learning communities based on a shared purpose rather than geography” (p. 12). Schwier also says that “they are a natural extension of who we are as social animals” (p. 1). This author believes that communities are organic, and claims that “they resist being confined by the constraints that social engineers would place on them” (pp. 5-6). In this article, Schwier points out that “communities cannot be created; rather, they emerge when conditions nurture them”, and states that “when boundaries are drawn around a community, the community seems to find a way to redefine itself – to mutate” (p. 6). In his discussion of the theoretical context of community, Schwier defines communities as being resilient, as being hospitable, as having life cycles, and as being multifaceted (2001). Schwier goes on to describe the following three main categories for examining virtual learning communities: *catalysts* of virtual learning communities, *purposes* of virtual learning communities, and *elements* of virtual learning communities. The main catalyst in virtual communities is communication, which Schwier says is “the actual brick and mortar of the community” (p. 8). Other catalysts include interaction or social participation, engagement of ideas, people and processes, and the dynamic process of aligning the “personal, private purposes with the collective, public purposes of the community” (p. 12). The purposes or emphases of virtual communities include communities of relationship, communities of place, communities of ideas, communities of reflection, and communities of ceremony. And finally, Schwier provides the following ten elements of virtual communities: historicity, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation, integration, future movement, technology, and learning. In this detailed examination of virtual learning communities, Schwier “does not pretend

that using technology to support the development of virtual learning communities will address the many challenges faced by schools and other institutionalized learning communities”, and points out that “it is quite possible that virtual learning communities will remain largely irrelevant to formal, institution-based education” (2001, p. 17).

The challenges to creating social capital through virtual learning communities are numerous. Perhaps it is my epistemology that causes me to be more interested in what doesn't work rather than what can work. Do we have significant motivation to justify the time and effort expended on the search for social capital in cyberspace? Even if we can justify our search, the pragmatist in me wonders what *strings* will be attached to our newfound community. So before we look at any possible assets to virtual communities, we will now consider their potential drawbacks.

Drawbacks of Virtual Communities

The literature on virtual learning communities abounds with accounts of the benefits of computer networks for establishing social capital and for generally enhancing our lives and our learning. Though much less seems to have been written on the potential drawbacks of virtual communities, it was not difficult, nonetheless, to quickly accrue a long list of “cons” to using computers to establish social capital. Even those such as myself, who love and embrace technology in all its forms, have realized that virtual communities have some serious shortcomings. Some of these shortcomings include, among others: exclusivity amongst community members, isolation and alienation, and access barriers such as lack of adequate training amongst participants, lack of social skills amongst members, the lack of context (decontextualization) inherent in written communication, and access barriers such as the financial burdens associated with the technology, inadequate training, and equipment failure. This list is certainly not exhaustive but simply reflects

some of the more glaring disadvantages that I encountered in my perusal of the literature and in my reflection on my own experiences with online communities.

The Exclusive Club Mentality

Our previous discussion of social capital and virtual learning communities reveals many desirable qualities such as trust, honesty, cooperation, the keeping of commitments, and networks of strong personal relationships that most members of society would obviously deem valuable in the communities they are involved in. However several authors have realized that just as these virtues can be used to draw people in to their membership, they can also be used to keep others out. Daniel, Schwier & McCalla (2003) point out that

Communities that exhibit highly cohesive forms of social capital are thus not necessarily beneficial to the overall society. Cohesive communities that manifest strong social capital may exclude others from entering into the communities, and this can lead to abuses that harm the community. (p. 8)

These authors go on to say, “these groups might encourage internal trust among their members while spreading hate and terror to the larger society. Such is the case with the terrorist organizations and organized crime groups” (2003, p. 8). Stephanie Frith reported for CNEWS that gangs were using the Web to recruit and plan crimes (2001). This is obviously an extreme example of the misuse of social capital, but it is important to examine the impetus behind the *community*. Kosonen similarly notes that “maximizing social capital may lead to negative consequences such as exclusion of outsiders and restrictions on individual freedoms” (2003, p. 3).

Bertram Bruce, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, makes the almost shocking assertion that “even the basic computer interface becomes a site for the maintenance of power relations, favouring professional over working class users, English speakers over non-English, men over women, white over black, and other all-too-familiar hierarchies” (2004, p. 4).

Andrew Calcutt, author of the book *White Noise*, writes, “cyber-communitarians are enthusiastic about the new forms of conversation facilitated by digital communications. But the new community is perhaps more remarkable for what it excludes than for what is included in it” (1999, p. 22). Similar to Bruce, Ziauddin Sardar, co-editor of a special edition of *Futures* journal entitled “Cyberspace: To Boldly Go”, claims the following:

In a cyberspace community you can shut people off at the click of a mouse and go elsewhere. One therefore has no responsibility of any kind.... But virtual communities serve another purpose; they protect us from the race and gender mix of real community, from the contamination of pluralism. (1995, pp. 787-8)

Calcutt expands on this exclusive club mentality when he states, “virtual communities also define themselves according to *who* is excluded... The online community is essentially a club which represents a retreat from the street” (1999, p. 23). Being *virtual* is often enough to keep those out who will not know the *url* or who will not be able to navigate the site. Even simple mechanisms such as the interface at the reception area and the language used is artificially exclusive, with no greater purpose than to set up walls around the members and to keep out those who are unfamiliar with the inner workings of the group.

Isolationism

Barry Wellman discusses the “vigorous public debate about whether people can find community on-line” and comments that “critics wonder whether relationships between people who never see, smell, or hear each other can be the basis for true community” (2001, p. 3). Wellman expands on this idea when he says that “the Internet may be so immersive that it lures people away from other pursuits and involves them in online interactions that only reinforce their existing opinions” (2001, p. 3). Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, and Donovan (2002) examine the question of whether time spent online erodes social capital and state that

Some scholars assume the internet will hasten America's civic disengagement, contending that internet use weakens real-world ties and reduces community involvement because individuals who invest time and energy in online activities have less to invest in other interactions. (p. 3)

Though these authors consider such views to be unnecessarily pessimistic, they do concede that “the underlying assumption of this line of theorizing is persuasive: connecting with others in online environments displaces strong, face-to-face ties with weak associations” (2002, p. 3). Andrew Calcutt (1999) notes that “the desire for virtual communities is partly a desire to alienate oneself further from a society from which one already feels alienated” (p. 22), and adds that “the tie that binds the cyber-communities together is their alienation from the rest of the world” (p. 25). Calcutt also makes an interesting comparison between virtual communities and the ever-expanding community of home-schooled individuals when he says “it is like online communities because a greater number of people are choosing to get their education online to avoid scary schools and thus are avoiding a responsibility to struggle with our imperfect society” (1999, p. 23).

In a fascinating book by Clifford Stoll, entitled *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*, the author discusses his eventual disenchantment with his “networked world” and recalls the history of the internet and how it began as an academic tool to help groups stay informed, somewhat like a type of memo delivery service. Stoll recounts how it moved from an exciting “plaything” to “a whole new way to communicate”, and realized, in 1986, that “our networks aren't simple connections of cables and computers; they're cooperative communities” (1995, p. 2). However, Stoll's proviso is this:

But what a price! Simply keeping tract of this electronic neighborhood takes a couple of hours every night. I find myself pawing through internet archives or searching for novelties over the World Wide Web. I spend still more time downloading files and following newsgroups. Bit by bit, my days dribble away, trickling out my modem. (p. 2)

Eventually, then, Stoll began to ask himself some serious questions, such as, “Perhaps our networked world isn’t a universal doorway to freedom. Might it be a distraction from reality? An ostrich hole to divert our attention and resources from social problems? A misuse of technology that encourages passive rather than active participation” (1995, p. 2)? Stoll seems to make the point that we need not abandon virtual communities, but rather we need to take a critical look at what we are gaining from our involvement with them and what we risk to lose, since “every hour that you’re behind the keyboard is sixty minutes that you’re not doing something else” (Stoll, 1995, p. 14).

It is wise to remember that our relationships with technology, be it the internet or even the cell phone, can seriously threaten our relationships with our friends, colleagues, and loved ones. My wife’s friend recently recounted a scene from her recent trip to England, where at an outdoor pub she watched no less than twelve people engage in cell phone conversations while those they were having drinks with tried not to look rejected and annoyed. It seems to be a flaw in human nature to take a potentially good thing and turn it into a bad thing that we use to abuse others.

Access Barriers

Despite the hype and the excitement most seem to feel about jumping onto the technology bandwagon, there can be many inherent flaws and barriers to any technological advance. One such barrier is the cost of the technology. Kowch and Schwier (1997) point out that “on the surface, the most imposing barrier appears to be financial. Technology requires hardware, software, and access, and these elements can be expensive” (p. 8). And Barry Wellman reminds us that “an Internet year is like a dog year, changing approximately seven times faster than normal human time” (2001, p. 7). I personally am reminded by my wife constantly that it is not financially feasible for me to dream about and plan for my next computer purchase, since we have not yet finished the four years of

payments owing on our current home computer, one which, at the time, I assured her had all the features I would need to be happy “forever”. Clifford Stoll claims that the excitement and glitz of computer usage in schools is crippling our school board budgets as they try to keep up with the costs of the high speed infrastructure. Stoll (1995) says the most serious negative effect of money spent on computers in schools is the lack of money to buy books for school libraries. Similarly, Leslie Shade, in reviewing the article entitled “Tech high; globalization & the future of Canadian education” (1998) describes Ontario’s education system overhaul that slashed basically all budgets in order to support expansion of its technical resources budget:

Ontario is currently overhauling its education system in the guise of ‘educational reform’. The amalgamation of school boards, budget cuts leading to the elimination of teacher-librarians, administrative staff, and support staff in the area of special needs and counselling; and province-wide testing are just a few of the many changes Ontario is implementing. While human resources are being slashed (and classrooms getting larger), technical resources (computers and connections for the Internet) are being touted. (1998, p. 1)

While these changes might be the growing pains of education, they demonstrate a growing confusion between what looks good in theory and what is genuinely good for learning. Learning and community are not simply improved by throwing money at technology and ignoring the real people who are trying to make real connections in a real classroom.

Teacher Training and Inadequate Skill Sets

In my own experience as the computer representative in the schools in which I have worked, I have witnessed first hand the critical lack of training and experience that many or most teachers seem to have had to enable them to successfully and independently use their classroom computers. And just when it seems that everyone in my building can finally write their own report cards or use their own software fairly successfully without my help, along comes some new equipment or

programs that set everyone back again, like infants who are trying to take their first independent steps while being bowled over by the family dog. Even once successfully engaged in their own virtual communities, many members seriously lack the keyboarding skills, written language skills, or social skills to interact effectively online. Kowch and Schwier state that

Each technology, even the most modest, requires some hardware and budget to support interaction some technologies introduce specific barriers. For example, access to chat rooms requires keyboarding skills. Poor typing skills limit the amount and quality of the interaction, and probably test the patience of other participants (1997, p. 7).

Clearly, school-based staffs have been thrown into the cyber world often ill equipped to function as contributing members of their virtual communities. Kowch and Schwier ask the question, “What kinds of pre-service preparation and professional development opportunities do educators require to adopt new roles demanded by technology-based interventions” (1997, p. 8)? Adapting to the virtual modes of communication also requires much more than sufficient typing skills. The lack of context and non-verbal cues causes many to feel lost in a virtual conversation. During a face-to-face conversation, the listener continually sends non-verbal messages such as varied facial expressions and other forms of body language to indicate that he or she is, or is not, fully understanding the speaker’s message. Breakdowns in communication can also be dealt with instantly in personal conversations, by inserting comments such as “So what you’re trying to say is...”. During written, e-mail conversations, on the other hand, there are no such opportunities to make prompt requests for clarification, to utilize non-verbal cues to enhance comprehension, or to repair communication breakdowns. There is another facet to this barrier as well. There appears to me to be a new language developing among online discussion users that is almost a form of short hand. Not knowing this short hand or using it poorly, are just more nails in the coffin of social capital and online communities.

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Conclusion to this Section

Barry Wellman notes that computer enthusiasts and sceptics too often propose a “Manichean debate”. . . “The Internet is bringing heaven or hell, but nothing in between” (2001, p. 4). Bruce (2004), claims that we must

Step back to consider what we are doing when we introduce new technologies into schools, and perhaps more significantly, to raise questions about what technologies are, and how they are implicated in social relations. Moreover....when we incorporate new tools into social life the complexities and conflicts of social life do not disappear at all” (retrieved on 9/19/04, p. 2).

Bruce's conclusion is that we need, therefore, to question "the commonly held view that computer technology is a tool that will in and of itself improve education, and ultimately ameliorate social ills" (p. 2). And Stoll, who is our confirmed sceptic, makes this comment about computer networks: "Everywhere you turn you see lots of excitement and plenty of glitz, but little substance and even less reflection" (1995, p. 10). With respect to student learning, Kowch and Schwier state the following:

Some of the strongest objections to many distance education initiatives charge that they are expensive, they are difficult to manage, and they fail to provide the type of interaction and engagement among students necessary to promote a high level of learning. (1997, p. 8)

Though the drawbacks to virtual learning are many, Bruce points out that we cannot easily disengage from this new lifestyle we have unwittingly entered into. He says, "our conversation, our activities, and our connection to the computer and its actions are all part of a network of practice that cannot be disentangled" (retrieved on 9/19/04, p. 7). We are then, practically slaves to technology whether we embrace it or not, and as Bruce eloquently says, "what emerges is that rather than being positioned as free agents about to select a fresh apple, we find ourselves already biting into one with worms in it" (p. 7).

Personal Reflections on the Assets of Virtual Communities

In his e-book, *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold (1998) describes his passion for the Internet community he has experienced. He has been a part of "WELL ([Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link](#))--a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private electronic mail (e-mail)" since 1985. Rheingold says that, "The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I

learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences.” I have not had Rheingold’s experience with these communities, but I certainly have had the same reservations about the possibility of finding true community and social capital online. The “loosely bound and sparsely knit” networks online described by Barry Wellman in the introduction to this paper certainly have their drawbacks, as delineated in the previous section. But that does not mean that I cannot find or at least continue to search for some productive online community. A large body of research talks about virtual communities and their potentials and possibilities, so I decided not to contribute to that body of work with a literature review in this paper. Instead, I would like to focus on my personal journey to find a meaningful online community that would meet my own learning and professional needs. Barbara Bray in “This is Your Brain on the Internet”, says

Research shows that the capacity to support collaboration, reflection and professional development, as well as to overcome the barriers of time and place, makes the use of online forums a potentially useful and cost effective innovation" (2003, p. 1).

One of the greatest potential benefits of virtual communities for me is the ability to network with other teachers who are experiencing the same issues as I am in their own work settings. I feel a great need to overcome the isolation of my work and I long to have an effective way to find information and resources. As Bray points out,

Teachers typically work in isolation from their peers, and the prevailing professional and bureaucratic expectation is that they achieve a level of competency on their own. As a means of overcoming this professional isolation, online discussion groups could assume an important role as information-exchange opportunities between teachers (2003, p. 2)

In my research for this paper, I have discovered what appears to be a very relevant online community that might assist me as a teacher. It is called Tapped In (www.ti2.org). Joyce Kasman Valenza, of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (2004), wrote an article entitled “Online ‘campus’ for educators to meet, mentor, talk, develop”. In this article Valenza quotes an art teacher from

Pennsylvania who discusses how she and other teachers in this online community can share professional development programs and other types of support. She writes that, “Without an online community, this sharing would never have been possible. . . . In some ways, all teachers are isolated when they close their classroom doors. They don’t talk to another adult most of the day. . . and I get support from the community” (2004, p. 1). This is the crux of the matter for me. How can I find this support without wasting my valuable time searching for it?

Mark Schlager and Judith Fusco wrote an article describing the underlying structure and purpose behind Tapped In. The article is entitled, “Teacher Professional Development, Technology, and Communities of Practice: Are we Putting The Cart before the Horse” (retrieved on Feb. 4, 2005). The authors describe how professional development traditionally has taken teachers from their community of practice and simply given them information. They write, “Only by engaging in work and talking about the work from inside the practice can one learn to be a competent practitioner” (p. 1). This community of practice is, according to the article, “an ideal learning environment” (p. 1). Schlager and Fusco have tried to be very specific about the label that paints our perception of their community. They state that

Although we have tried ardently to cultivate a social entity that reflects all the major characteristics of communities of practice described in the literature, and in many ways have been very successful, we have struggled to define the practice. The members of Tapped In appear to participate in many, sometimes overlapping, communities of practice in and outside of the Tapped In environment, suggesting that Tapped In may be better described as a network of practice, or a crossroads of multiple educator communities (pp. 1-2).

These authors believe that it is very important to have clear labels for a community so that you will recognize what your goals are and whether or not you have achieved them. Schlager and Fusco claim that they have been successful in building a “network of practice”. They write, “Tapped In has been quite successful in achieving its original goal of bringing together and forging new

relationships among education practitioners, providers, and researchers from around the world on a daily basis” (p. 2). The variety of activities these community members participate in is inspirational. They develop specific courses and inservice others on these courses, they have specific grade and subject group meetings, they have public discussions on a variety of topics from all grade levels, and they post bulletin boards where individuals ask for and give help to their colleagues from around the Earth. What also makes this community successful is what they have *not* tried to accomplish. Schlager and Fusco write that, “we have almost certainly ignored or rejected design alternatives that would have supported more effectively the professional activities in which our members participate in their local context of practice” (p. 2). I have only spent a few hours in this community. The one very successful element of my experience there has been the reception area. Tapped In uses volunteers who patrol this first virtual room that you enter upon logging in. They have been very helpful to me, and when I mentioned my class and this paper, I even received a copy of a paper from a volunteer who has written about virtual communities himself.

Conclusion

My interest in this topic comes with much history. I have worked as a youth pastor and youth counselor in various community and church organizations. Now I teach grade 8 in a public school. In all these positions I have been keenly aware of community. It has been my job to establish a safe and caring relationship with the youth with whom I have worked. Trust and respect have been the capital that I have accrued with these students in order to successfully accomplish our tasks. While the tasks have been extremely varied, the focus on community has stayed the same. I

realize now that I have become an expert in quickly establishing trust and respect with students. These social relationships allow us as a community to pool our resources, and these resources then become the raw material from which we draw upon to accomplish our particular goals.

Now as I study the virtual communities I am very interested in finding ways to develop a new kind of capital. In public education it is easy to feel isolated as you strive to find innovative ways to establish a learning environment for your students. I am the only grade 8 teacher in our school. Grade 8 students are extremely unique creatures in the elementary school, with unique learning and social needs, and they are routinely overlooked and misunderstood by the rest of the school staff. Since the demands on my time are so great, and since there is no one else in my building who can understand or assist me in meeting these demands, I find myself turning to the World Wide Web for assistance. What I really want is a community of grade 8 teachers who can share their ideas, struggles, and successes. I admit that I am like Ulysses on an odyssey. One of the trials of this journey I need to endure is the process of searching the vast ocean of cyber-space. Searching the Internet can be a long and frustrating venture, and many would caution us from placing too much stock in the quality of the resources we can find on the Internet. In the latest edition of one of my wife's professional journals, the *Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology*, Dr. Phyllis Schneider points out that

Information of all kinds is now easily accessible through the Internet. However, the quality of information varies greatly. This is not critical if you are searching for a movie review or a recipe for Cajun chicken; it becomes important when looking for information to assist in professional activities (2004, p. 154).

Wellman, as well, points out the following:

How do people work together in large sprawling, networked organizations where they are simultaneously members of multiple, transitory, physically dispersed teams? In particular, how do people in such organizations obtain knowledge from others when they do not know whom to ask? (2001, p. 6)

So whom do I ask, and where should I go to find the community I seek? While searching for these answers, I must resist the call of the *sirens* in the strange and distracting sites on the WWW that do nothing to assist me in finding my *Ithica*. Like the famed Ulysses, I have been “roaming with a hungry heart”, and searching, “To follow knowledge like a sinking star” (Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1842).

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