

Community

Building Virtual Communities: Parallel Universes of the Mind by Hilarie Bryce Davis, Ed.D.

Where do you live? If home is where the heart is, where does the mind live? What makes a community of minds? When do you feel as if you belong? The exponential growth of the Internet as a home for the mind has opened up the possibility of virtual communities, complete with front porches and main streets of a sort. Wholly constructed by their inhabitants, these virtual communities offer socially constructed knowledge without face-to-face contact or physical constraints. They are as stable as the ideas generated and as safe as the reciprocal respect of the participants.

How do you become an active netizen? What can you offer this community? How can you expect to benefit? Use of the Internet has grown exponentially in the last five years and is expected to continue to grow with the advent of "set top boxes" for televisions and cable access. Radio stations, the local hairdresser and schools are "on line."

If you have not joined this virtual community, you may be feeling left out, or behind the times. You have probably noticed that people ask you for your email address almost as frequently as your phone number. Others tell stories about the great "stuff" you can find on the World Wide Web.

To homestead on the Net, you can create a home page, join a project or put your name on a listserv. It's similar to having a phone number listed in the white pages (btw, are on the web) only more personal. With a web page, you make a contribution to the Internet community and stake a claim in this parallel universe.

What kind of community is the Internet? Where are its front porches and meeting places? What kind of folks will you find there? If you think about the communities you find yourself in now, you can expect to find similar ones on line. Your town, school district, church, family, profession, hobby and region are all communities you may call your own. We join these communities by happenstance or by design, out of interest or commitment, and we find ourselves more or less at home in them. They become part of our identity and we shape them with our time and activities.

We are not human creatures living in a spiritual world.
We are spiritual creatures living in a human world.
-- Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit mystic

These virtual communities are a different kind of place. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg writes that, "The problem with American society and urban life is that it lacks 'third places' where an informal public life can take place. Third places expand social possibilities with conversation almost any time of the day or evening. Third places are frequented by "regulars" and the mood is playful." The new third places are virtual - they are a place of their own making.

In fact, the Internet is a collection of third places, a community of communities. An expanding network of information and resources created by people from all walks of life to reflect their interests, needs and contributions. Collections, conversations, common workspaces and simulations appear on the Net, created by amateurs and professional webmasters alike. Although originally heralded as the information superhighway, Netizens prefer to think of their community as a frontier to be settled or, as I have suggested, a parallel universe to be explored. Information is an important part of what the Net offers, but it is the people you meet, the results of sharing information and building knowledge that make the Net Oldenburg's third place. It is invented, and reinvented by the people who are there.

There is an old story about a man who was unhappy in his community in Kentucky in the 1830's. He packed up and started west. When he came to a new town, he asked, "What kind of people live here?" The answer came, "Well what kind of people live where you come from?" When he was said he'd left because the people were liars and cheats, he was told, "I guess you'll find those kind of people here too." The story goes on to tell about another man who came through that day and asked the same question, "What kind of people live here?" When the question came back, "Well what kind of people are there where you come from?" he answered, "Good folks, trying to do their best." The same fellow who had responded to the first traveler answered, "Well, I guess you'll find the same kind of folks here." Both men found what they expected to find, and no more.

For the moment, at least, we scattered souls have become an electronically linked virtual community. -- Mitchell, *City of Bits*

While the Internet has the possibility of creating community, it is and

will be no more (or less) than what we make it. For some it will be a wider community because of being able to talk to people and see their work even if they are halfway across the world. For some it will be a larger community because of being able to find more like-minded people to share interests and passions. For some it will be a stronger community because of the frequency of interaction, the quick response to requests and needs and the freedom from having to schedule time to communicate. For still others, it will be their first community because writing allows them to make connections not possible or comfortable in person.

Sometimes the Internet is touted as the beginning of a better society, more egalitarian, more interesting and more open. At other times the Internet is portrayed as reflecting the worst of our society, spreading pornography and fostering hate groups. I would suggest that the Internet is a parallel universe, created by us, the same people who created the society we live in in physical space. It offers us, perhaps a place to practice being our best selves, to increase communication, and to use that to solve some of the problems we face individually and globally.

We have the opportunity to reinvent ourselves in this virtual space. It can hold the best of who we are and perhaps allow us to face down the monsters under the bed. We are who we are individually and collectively because of where and when and how we live, on this earth, in our physical, professional and spiritual communities. We have co-evolved with the structure of our world and each other, and just as we have adapted to the systems of our lives - geographic, social, emotional and intellectual - we will adapt to this electronic environment and change it as we go.

How we settle in this parallel universe will determine how we take advantage of one of its most powerful possibilities - reflection. Speed and access are balanced by the thoughtfulness provoked by writing and the time lag between responses. Composing for an audience and responding to others are often out of sync. In the space between, there is the possibility for thought.

The electronic environment is:

- Not face-to-face, but an interface.
- Not immediate in time, but asynchronous
- Not difficult, expensive or exclusive, but accessible
- Not bound by space - global as well as local

- Not physical, but sensory selective communication

Can you imagine it? A landscape, running parallel to our physical world, whose highways and byways are rivers of communication. Where landmarks are wholly created by individuals and groups and where time and space do not bind everything together. Only language and thought, and increasingly, images, connect people and ideas. Information, relationships and resources are connected and reconnected by minds at work. Like the stuff of science fiction, people here are time travelers, leaving trails of conscious connections.

What does this landscape of the electronic environment offer us, demand of us? What possibilities does it hold for work, for quality of life and for learning? How can we maximize its potential for creating positive communities? As we consider how to use the Internet for building communities of learners, three questions arise:

How is learning redefined in an online community?
How is an online community redefined by learners?
What sustains an online learning community?

If we are who we are, how do we become what we will be? (grin)
Abraham Maslow suggests a hierarchy of needs:

Self-Actualization
Self-Esteem
Love and Belonging
Safety
Physiological Needs

This parallel universe of the Internet is not complicated by our physical needs (except for remembering to take breaks and move around). We can walk away from any conversation on line, move from any web site to another and delete any message without responding. We have the safety that comes with having complete control over timing and interactions. With the feeling of safety, we can turn to the next need in Maslow's hierarchy - "belonging."

Belonging is based on participation, so at the same time we are able to control interactions enough to feel safe, we want to reach out and build relationships which are satisfying and which make us feel part of the larger community.

How can we satisfy the need for belonging in a virtual community? The virtual community is not unlike an ecosystem in that it must be self-sustaining. A thriving community is based on networks of networks - people who are connected in different ways and co-evolve. The members of a community are interdependent and develop feedback loops for the flow of ideas.

Communities grow through feedback. When the members interact, patterns develop which lead to the norms which define the system. The interactions are the "stuff" that a community is made of. The cultural signposts allow people to enter the community and communicate effectively. With this scaffolding, meaning making becomes explicitly and collectively built. A "persistent" environment allows patterns to emerge which form the basis of growing collective wisdom. (riffs)

These evolving structures can mean freedom to create, imagine and invent together. If there could be a recipe for community building, it might go something like this: take some people who have shared goals, get them mixing their ideas to build relationships with each other, add regular reflection to raise the communication to metacognitive levels, and pour into a place which needs to be invented. Then get everyone visualizing (and salivating) for results. Each ingredient adds something unique to the community building process.

Shared goals have the most power for community building when they are complex, intriguing and multistep. When the goal is challenging for everyone, each person is reaching and values everyone else's input.

Relationships begin to form based on people's differences, because challenges cause people to reach out for alternative solutions, to question their own perspective and to be open to diverse ideas.

Reflection pushes knowledge outside ourselves so we can look at it more clearly. When ideas stay inside our heads exclusively, we look for justification for them, rather than examining and growing them.

Third places must be invented by those who come there at any given time. Community places on the Net need to be planned, evolving, responsive, intriguing and open-ended. In her book on imagination, Maxine Green talks about unfinished business as the most intriguing . . .

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Results in the virtual community are today's results. The community recycles them through feedback, trial and error and massage. Some ideas prove to be enduring - to have a kind of momentum. These might be elevated to conclusion, but a virtual community is always under construction.

All of this depends on participation. When we designed the Online Interest Institute, a professional development community for educators, we asked participants to come with a quest. Those who did were productive, satisfied with what they learned and ready to do projects with their students on the Net after the course was finished. Those who did not have a quest were busy, learned, but went away "intending" to use the Internet. They were not ready to use it with their students because they had not used been excited by finding out something of particular interest to them and they had not put it all together through personal experience.

The more intense the quest, the more involvement and learning which is possible. I like the cartoon of the artist with the caption, "I'm not a workaholic, I'm an artist. Artists are not workaholics, we're obsessed. It's different!" Somewhere between workaholic and obsessed lies sufficient motivation to become involved enough in learning. Without this motivational prod, learning tends to be minimal and short term. Intent is at least as important as content because it starts the spiral of finding out and wanting to know still more.

Online communities reinvent the human habitat and require new social skills for constructing meaning:

Critique replaced with Recycling ideas
Carving out niches > Pattern seeking
Competing > Co-evolving
Cliques > Partnerships
Rule enforcement > Peer-regulation
Domination > Self regulation
Quantity > Quality

Project structures provide frames of reference for practicing these new skills in the context of meaningful and curriculum based content. In our work with adults, we have extended the project structures originally defined by Professor Judi Harris from the University of Austin. These structures define the goals, relationships and results of a community. Add systematic reflection and they provide enough structure to encourage communication while inviting creativity. Each

type of project involves people for different reasons and in different ways.

Virtual communities require an act of imagination
to use and what must be imagined
is the idea of the community itself.

-- Marc Smith

People to People Projects

In People to People Projects, participants feel connect through common values. I*EARN is a good example of an organization, united around connecting people who want to do social action projects - getting resources for developing communities, helping individuals in need, or improving the environment. People join and participate because they are inspired by the goal. Their involvement may take the form of persuasion of others to participate or sharing their own knowledge and resources. Reflection in these projects comes in the feedback loop between those receiving help and those offering it. Is it working? How do we know? Did we get results? Why? When these questions are asked throughout the process, they act as a conduit for information, which invites even more participation and timely, effective use of the resources and talents of the community to address the problem. People to People Projects can take different forms and work for different reasons.

- Keypals - an audience motivates people to write better and more often
- Guest appearances - brings heroes closer and inspires better performance
- Mentoring - personal attention by a more experienced person
- Impersonations - builds empathy and identification with another person
- Global classrooms - magic of distance heightens interest and intrigue

Information Collection Projects

While all online communities are made up of people, the purpose of interaction may be more narrowly focused on information collection. Communities may exist to collect information from each other, from the world at large or from specific activities. Students may collect data on acid rain, or migration of geese or butterflies or the night sky and

exchange it with others. The purpose of these projects is data collection, summary and exchange. The benefit is developing knowledge from many different people across time and space. Reflection enriches the process by constantly checking every action against the plan, and at the same time, pulling back from the plan and asking, "How well is this working?"

- Information exchanges - excitement comes from collecting firsthand data
- Electronic publishing - required supporting data and checking sources
- Database creation - uses classification as the pattern
- Tele-fieldtrips - simulated experience requires careful observation
- Pooled data analysis - patterns emerge with more data

Exploration and Evaluation Projects

Information overload requires incisive thinking. These projects give students tools to explore and evaluate resources from different perspectives. "Thoughtful surfing" requires constant reflection on the quality of the sites, and what they might be used for. The thoughtful surfer is looking for applications and connections, critiquing from multiple perspectives all the time. What is the value? What does it mean? What can I do with it? What questions can it be used to address? Reflection in these projects takes the form of critique. The results may be compiled in an evaluated collection, or move a draft through to final presentation. Projects include:

- Essential questions - the questions the site helps answer
- Critique - the value of the site relative to others on the same topic
- Evaluation - how well the goal of the site is accomplished
- Peer review - the meaning and usefulness to individuals
- Piggybacking - multiple reviews from different perspectives and people

Problem Solving Projects

The purpose of Problem Solving Projects is to identify problems, generate solutions, test and present them. They require knowing (and testing) the limits of current knowledge. Reflection fuels the process by emphasizing rigor and results. Types of projects include:

- Quests - pursuing curiosity
- Process writing - communication as a problem solving activity
- Parallel problem solving - different approaches, goal of replication
- Simulations - risk-free experience for testing solutions
- Social Action Projects - meeting needs

While many projects cut across this classification, it's usefulness is in defining the community of participants. The project structure gives the people of the community roles in relationship to the goal and specifies results. These definitions scaffold the interactions so they are more productive and satisfying to the participants than a completely unstructured environment where anarchy is the default. Like good fences making good neighbors, flexible, but defined structures make good communities.

The late 1990s may eventually be seen in retrospect as a narrow window of historical opportunity, when people either acted or failed to act effectively to regain control over communications technologies. Armed with knowledge, guided by a clear, human-centered vision, governed by a commitment to civil discourse, we the citizens hold the key levers at a pivotal time. What happens next is largely up to us.

We have a chance to reinvent ourselves - to try out new ways of learning and caring and helping each other. Perhaps, the ultimate test of our virtual interface worlds will be how we meet face-to-face, afterwards, on the other side. Perhaps this is where we choose the future.

We are one,
after all,
you and I
together we suffer,
together exist,
and forever will recreate one another.
--Teilhard de Chardin

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