Chapter 6

Getting Past Our Assumptions about Web 2.0 and Community Building:
How to Design Research–Based Literacy Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

While many social media technologies present opportunities to create Networked Knowledge Communities (NKCs), hierarchies among users, content managers, and programmers persist. In the classroom, instructors must manage these power dynamics, yet few have been trained to critically examine technological programs' affordances to see how they foster community or not. The authors examine a blog assignment for a pedagogy course in which students, after posting several entries, are required to analyze the class's blog usage to address whether a community was formed through the social media. Through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the blog assignment the authors learned that while several students claim that the limited number of interactive posts resulted because the instructor did not model community-forming behaviors, community is too complex to impose upon a group. As a result, the authors conclude that instructors, as "programmers" of the rhetorical and instructional situations, need to design and articulate the desired outcomes of community building.

BACKGROUND

In the October 29th special report in *Time* (2012) on higher education, journalist Ripley begins her article, "College is Dead. Long Live College!" with an anecdote about an 11-year-old Pakistani girl whose final exam for her free college-level physics course gets interrupted by her country's government shutdown of YouTube—the government's attempt to limit the viewing of a politically and religiously charged video. Despite her inability to complete her exam, the determined girl composes a frustrated post on the class's discussion board. Within an hour, several of her classmates from around the world were trying to help her solve the problem—some were merely suggesting workarounds, while others were actively trying to create avenues to make the blocked content available to her. Ultimately the Pakistani girl was able to finish the exam after her Portuguese professor spent four hours downloading the videos and uploading them to a site accessible in her country. In her narration of this story about the new state of education, Ripley emphasizes the utopian features of these emerging educational instruction practices and instructional communities: "None of these students had met each other in person. The class directory included people from 125 countries. But after weeks in the class, helping one another... they'd start to feel as if they shared the same carrel in the library. Together, they'd found a passageway into a rigorous, free, college-level class, and they weren't about to let anyone lock it up" (p. 34).

In this story we see strangers from all over the world and, presumably, from all walks of life working together to solve the problem of one individual. This trope is the global dream; rather than people from all over the world warring and arguing because of their differences, people overcome their difference and create a global community—a new world vision that also emerges in Microsoft and Cisco advertisements among others (Selfe, 1999). And although Ripley never directly mentions the technology, we see it playing a heroic role in this narrative. While the Pakistani girl is able to finish her exam because of the graciousness of others, it is the computer technologies that allow these individuals from around the world to come together. In essence, this 11-year-old girl would not have this opportunity if it were not for the networked technology; the classmates would not be able to connect with each other if it were not for the networked technology, and there would not be a solution to this problem if it were not for the networked technology.

This trope is prevalent in some of the early observations about the connections people were making within online networked technologies. Rheingold (1993) observed, "the community's social contracts stretch and change as the people who discovered and started building the WELL[1] [a virtual community] in its first year or two were joined by so many others. Norms were established, challenged, changed, reestablished, rechallenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution" (n.p.). For Rheingold, virtual communities followed many of the same trajectories as "real life" communities, except they materialized at accelerated rates. His often-cited work helped to establish the trope of the ideal community mediated mostly by computer technologies--much like the one Ripley describes. Rheingold's audience can, however, understand the idealism he cultivated in 1993 during the popular emergence of these networked technologies, a time when the developers and users of these technologies focused primarily on their promise. But for every utopic tale about digital communication's communal properties, there are tales of government intervention and censorship, cyberrape (Dibbell, 1998), bullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mesch, 2009), and, as most Facebook users would say, simply "way too much drama."

We believe that both of these strands of narratives shape our networked knowledge society and the networked knowledge communities (NKCs) within these societies. These networked societies, Castells (2011) suggests, are governed by

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