Building Communities of Educational Enquiry

Draft Report of Phase one of the AERS Learners Learning & Teaching Network

Claire Cassidy, University of Strathclyde,
Donald Christie, University of Strathclyde,
Norman Coutts, University of Aberdeen
Jayne Dunn, University of Dundee
Christine Sinclair, University of Strathclyde
Don Skinner, University of Edinburgh
Alastair Wilson, University of Strathclyde

Abstract
There is an increasing recognition of the potential of collaborative approaches to research in Education. This paper focuses on how communities can be nurtured to develop, foster and support enquiry that may contribute to educational research. The paper offers an analysis of how different types of communities of enquiry are conceptualised from a range of academic perspectives. In addition it contains an account of how our own community of enquiry, formed to carry out this piece of work, has evolved over a period of six months. A tentative set of recommendations is drawn from these two sources. The recommendations are preliminary ones because, as our findings are disseminated, we anticipate being able to refine and extend them through dialogue with our readers.

Introduction
The Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) is jointly funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Scottish Executive Education Department with the intended purpose to “enhance educational research capability in Scottish HE institutions, and to use that capability to conduct high-quality research which will benefit school education in Scotland.” One of the hallmarks of the research networks established under AERS is a collaborative model of educational research. The present study arises from one of the projects of the AERS Learners, Learning and Teaching Network. The aim of the study was to review the relevant literature and offer suggestions to support the building of communities of educational enquiry. We have come from different institutions around Scotland and a range of academic “tribes” (Becher 1989; Becher and Trowler 2001), including Education, Philosophy, Psychology and Social Policy. We have met a number of times and also communicate electronically, through email, video conferencing and a virtual “space” dedicated to the work of the parent project within which we have our own private space. The “voice” of this group comes not only through the ideas presented in this paper, but also through boxed reflections. As these arise during the paper, the reader should be able to see some of the tensions, contradictions and dilemmas faced by our group as we became established as a community.

One key feature of the concept of community is that it creates, supports and develops “learning”, itself a word that defies easy definition. Claims that researchers and practitioners make about learning sometimes appear to be based on a tacit assumption that everything we describe as learning can be said to have common features, an assumption identified, and rejected, by Roger Säljö (1997). We have not attempted here to make any definition of either “community” or “learning”; like Säljö,
we prefer to consider these ideas as parts of a framework for describing social activities and changes in those activities. Building such a framework for educational enquiry is our main aim. The starting point for this research was the need to acknowledge Education as a discipline and to put it in the context of other academic “tribes” (Becher 1989; Becher and Trowler 2001). The metaphor of the academic tribe highlights the reasons for the complexity of this issue: those involved in the discipline of Education are quite commonly already affiliated to other “tribes” and we learn from Becher’s work that these tribes operate in very different ways. These differences go well beyond the “two cultures” of Arts and Science. There are distinct differences, for example, in language conventions, methods of enquiry, dissemination practices, resolution of internal disputes, career structure, status and power relations, social practices, teaching practices and relationships across and within institutions. In particular, there are differences in what “counts” as good practice, the activities and their expression that are valued by each discipline. Some appraisal terms taken from disciplinary literature, for example, are: economical, elegant, original, masterly, persuasive, powerful, productive, practical, rigorous, scholarly, stimulating, well argued. A term of appraisal in one discipline might be “taken for granted” or even irrelevant in another. Moreover background disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and psychology are themselves internally very diverse. It is therefore not surprising that there is no current consensus about the status of Education as a discipline. Because its practitioners come from diverse fields of enquiry, there is a need for a context to facilitate engagement in educational enquiry that can accommodate the differences in perspective. One argument in this paper will be, however, that the diversity of practices can in itself be a fruitful source of enquiry – a basis for dialogue not only about what works in educational practice, but also, importantly, about why and under what circumstances certain practices might be successful.

There are many references to community in the literature and it was necessary to devise a mechanism for identifying and interrogating the literature effectively. Our selection of strands of literature to interrogate is necessarily based on our own histories and preferences. Nevertheless, we are presenting them for scrutiny as a representative example of what the literature has to say that might be useful to educational practitioners. In the following section we consider the literature within a framework of key concepts and ideas: “practice” (Communities of Practice); “enquiry” (Philosophical Inquiry); “the potential of electronic media” (electronic community); “writing” (Writers Groups); and a theoretical perspective on “collaborative activity” (Activity Theory). These conceptual categories are not always discrete, but they do represent distinctive emphases of different research perspectives.

Communities of Practice
The concept of ‘Communities of Practice’ has gathered considerable momentum over recent years. The increase in popularity is largely due to the increasing demands upon organisations to use knowledge effectively. Countries across the globe are faced with economic, political and cultural globalisation, which is being accompanied by rapidly developing communication technologies. This is leading to a ‘knowledge explosion’ which brings many significant challenges relating to how knowledge is shared, how new learning is developed and then how this is used to support innovative and effective practice. Wenger (1998) proposed that Communities of Practice offer organisations a mechanism to become ‘more intentional and systematic in managing knowledge’ and therefore respond to these
issues. So what are Communities of Practice? Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002:4) define Communities of Practice ‘as groups of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’. Let us consider this further through an example of a Community of Practice which operated within an education department in Australia:

The concepts of systems theory had been ‘bandied about’ in the Department of Education and Children’s Services in South Australia for over a year. The mounting interest had stimulated many discussions and debates. There were discussions about the complexity, ambiguity and unpredictable nature of education. There were discussions about the difficulty in leading and managing within highly complex and turbulent contexts. There were many questions about the ‘wisdom’ needed to be ‘successful’ in this type of environment. People saw a distinct need to think differently about the way education was viewed and the way people worked within it.

So… people started ‘playing with’ and applying their understandings of systems theory to their own work contexts. This included a group of eight people who worked in the Western suburbs of Adelaide. They came from different fields including social work, education, special education, psychology and management. They came from a number of different work groups. However, they all had a common interest, systems theory.

This group of eight decided that it would be worth meeting together regularly to explore and extend their learning about systems theory. Although they weren’t aware of it, they were about to establish a Community of Practice. They continued to meet together for 6 months. They talked about articles they had read, ideas they tried out, their understandings of their workplace and their disparate understandings of systems theory. As time went by they worked through some of the issues associated with ‘academic’ tribes. They developed a shared language and some shared understandings, they were able to debate concepts in an environment of trust, they attempted to embrace different professional worldviews by allowing their own paradigms to be challenged and they learnt a lot (extract from unpublished report).

The example above is not an uncommon scenario. Similar groups are evident in a range of workplaces without being called ‘Communities of Practice’. Wenger and Snyder (2002) acknowledge that Communities of Practice are not new even though their title may be. In fact, they suggest that these structures were evident in ancient Greek times when corporations of craftsmen met together for the purpose of developing their crafts further. The actual term ‘Communities of Practice’ originated from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991. The theory and underpinning philosophy was progressively shaped by Lave and Wenger but has also been contributed to by numerous others (Bate and Robert, 2002). This has resulted in a number of divergent definitions of the concept. The definitions appear to differ in areas of focus rather than general meaning. For example, Lesser and Storck’s (2001)
definition has a focus on social capital, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) definition has a focus on the development of organizational learning and Wenger and Snyder’s definition (2000) more strongly reflects organizational performance. Some writers have chosen not to define them at all because they are concerned that defining them will actually distort the way they operate. However the general view is that individuals and organizations will benefit greatly by enabling these structures to flourish.

Types of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice can take many different forms. Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) claim that Communities of Practice can be long lived or short lived, big or small, have the same or different geographical locations, be professionally homogenous of heterogeneous and operate within or across organizational boundaries. Mitchell, Wood and Young (2001) claim that Communities of Practice can take three different forms. These include a Community of Practice as a community of learners, a Community of Practice as a collaborative group within organizations and a Community of Practice as a virtual community. According to Mitchell et al, a community of learners refers to a community focused on individual and organizational learning. They believe that this type of Community of Practice provides the ideal conduit for learning as it allows participants to co-construct their knowledge by interacting together. The Systems Theory Community of Practice is an example of this type of community.

A Community of Practice as a collaborative group within organizations refers to a focus based in creating and disseminating knowledge. Lesser and Everest (2001, cited in Mitchell, Wood and Young, 2001:6) argue that a Community of Practice helps to develop the appropriate connections, relationships and context that allow knowledge to flow between those who have knowledge and those who require it. The focus here is to construct useful knowledge for the purpose of improved organizational outcomes. The third form Mitchell, Woods and Young (2001) describe as a Community of Practice, is a virtual community. They claim that Communities of Practice do not have to rely on face-to-face contact but could also occur in a virtual space via email or across the internet. This could be of significant benefit if the community includes participants across the globe. Regardless of the form the community takes, effective Communities of Practice share three common interrelated components. These are the domain, the community and the practice. Each of these components is essential for the effective operation of the Community of Practice. In fact, the ‘art of community development is to use the synergy between the domain, community, and practice to help a community to evolve to its full potential’ (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002:47).

Domain

The domain is related to the purpose of the group. It is important because it is what motivates the group and focuses the group’s direction. It creates common ground and a sense of common identity…The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions’ (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002:47).
McDermott and Snyder, 2002:27 – 28). As a Community of Practice emerges, participants are thought to co-construct the domain in a way that inspires them. The domain becomes the initial driving force so it needs to be broad enough to capture the interests of the group and yet clear enough to motivate. The domain also shapes the kind of knowledge that the community will share and develop. During the first meeting of the Systems Theory Community of Practice, the group co-constructed their shared purpose. This continued to emerge over time and it served to inspire the group. One participant of the Community of Practice shared his thoughts about how this happened.

‘It is also for me, sort of playing in someone else’s playground…I was actually fascinated by the range of issues we talked about. The way it sort of spirals out…and the way everybody takes it and uses it. It was great’ (Participant, Systems Theory Community of Practice, 2003).

Community

The ‘community’ is seen as the second interrelated component of a Community of Practice. Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) believed that the creation of an effective ‘community’ related to the establishment of genuinely trusting relationships, a sense of belonging and a sense of personal identity that provided a context and opportunity for members to freely volunteer and build knowledge’. They believed that this sense community emerged as interested individuals agreed to come together to participate in the Community of Practice. They saw members engaging in the community, not as a formal part of their work, but to clarify their work, define their work and refine the way it was done (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002). Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) described three critical phases of ‘community’ development. During the first phase members were seen to develop a sense of identity within the Community of Practice. At this time members were likely to evaluate the usefulness of the group and make a decision about their continued participation. It was seen to be critical for the community to have credibility at this point; otherwise, the momentum for a productive community would not be achieved:

For me, the very first meeting, I thought is this going to meet my needs?...I am committing a lot of time here, both personal time and work time in the way we have worked it out...and then I actually went back that night and I really reflected on ‘Why am I doing this?’ This gave me some personal tension for a few hours probably and then I thought no, it is really important because the benefit out ways my tensions...so I can see the way other people work and learn about different methods of operation and just look at it within the parameters of what we have set up as a learning group (Participant, Systems Theory Community of Practice 2003).

The second phase involves developing a sense of trust so participants can freely share knowledge and build upon their learning. However, it is also important to maintain a balance between the need for sound relationships and the need for focus on the domain otherwise the group can revert to a friendly network that is doesn’t
facilitate the co-construction of new learning. The third phase involves maintaining this balance between safety and intellectual rigor.

**Practice**

The third interrelated component that Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) speak of relates to the ‘practice’ aspect of Communities of Practice. They defined the practice as ‘a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability’ (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002:38) The practice aspect of the community explores both the existing body of knowledge the group has and the cutting edge knowledge the group will engage with as part as their quest to explore the domain. The practice within a Community of Practice is broad and includes a variety of knowledge types including more abstract concepts such as theories, principles, models and more tangible artefacts such as rules, specialized tools or manuals.

**Writing for Publication: Writers’ Groups for Researchers**

Writers’ Groups for researchers have arisen from a recognised need to support academic writers in starting or increasing their written output. They meet regularly, often over a pre-defined period (for example, six months), working towards achieving writing goals and offering practical support and opportunities to reflect jointly on their achievements. The research and theoretical basis of these groups has emerged from North American sources, particularly Boice’s work on more productive writing strategies for academics (Boice 1990) and Elbow’s work on breaking down inhibitions with writing, particularly for students (Elbow 1973). Murray (2002) has worked with these strategies with a number of Writers’ Groups in universities, adapting them to local conditions and constraints. She has also written about her experiences and her research suggests that the groups can be successful in their aim, though she does not underestimate the difficulties in overcoming the barriers to writing (Morss and Murray 2001; Murray 2002). Writers’ Groups can be interdisciplinary or homogenous, members of the groups are not working on the same piece of writing; their shared purpose is to increase productivity and support each other in doing so. Their enquiry is into techniques and strategies that help them to achieve this and they are led by an experienced writer and facilitator. A particular set of processes and strategies is used, notably the technique of “snacking” as well as or instead of “bingeing” on writing. An important feature of the groups is that participants discuss their own writing progress with each other. There are also some techniques offered that allow participants to circumscribe some of the constraints that their own context provides, particularly over control of resources such as time. Despite the lack of shared task, a sense of community does develop in these groups. A Writers’ Group is probably not strictly a community of enquiry, although there is a sense of enquiring into useful processes for increasing research output. Individuals involved undoubtedly are going through their own processes of enquiry. However, it maintains many of the useful features of the type of community envisaged in this paper, especially in relation to dialogue and increased research capacity.

**Community of Philosophical Inquiry.**

The notion of community is vital in the practice of Community of Philosophical Inquiry (COPI); there is more involved than a collection of disparate individuals gathering at
an appointed time in an appointed place for a communal purpose. Certainly the communal purpose is key and this is where perhaps community differs from the idea of society. “Society,” for Plato, “originates, then... so far as I can see, because the individual is not self-sufficient, but has many needs which he can’t supply himself”. As human animals we need to belong to a group, and it is this belongingness that is important. In a sense we do not simply belong by being part of a group, we are, to some extent, owned by that society or group. This idea of ownership implies some function on the side of both parties; some responsibility is required. Rousseau too follows the line that it is human need that creates the necessity – which is more than a desire – for society; “The mind as well as the body, has its needs: those of the body are the basis for society, those of the mind its ornaments”. As animals we need food and shelter and rarely is it the case that one might provide these things without the need of others. Even in isolation one will have some dependency on the ‘outside world’ in terms of finding the tools with which to make one’s shelter or gather one’s food. Humans need society to furnish themselves with the goods for practical living, and a society of collective individuals is what is called for.

It is not, however, the case that simple physical inclusion is what goes towards the creation of community; reciprocity and responsibility are essential. One is expected – indeed bound – to participate in some form. Within society everyone has at least one role to play, yet, it may be the nature of one’s participation that determines one’s membership in a society or community. If one considers slaves; they act because they are compelled to as opposed to acting from a sense of duty or obligation. Aristotle (384-322 BCE??! See references) suggests that “For even the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, but the good of the community is a greater and more perfect good both to get and to keep”. No-one stands alone, there is a dependency built into the notion of society and as such we are, as persons, obliged to undertake some forms of responsibility to the other members of the group. It is difficult to conceive of a society where there is little or no obligation between its members. It is imperative that in one’s participation one should deliberate, consider, reflect and inquire into and about one’s society or community – and this is exactly the model of participative communitarianism promoted within the practice of COPI and one which will ultimately work for the betterment of the wider society or community. Lipman (1988) asserts that when practical philosophy is encountered “There is a familiar ripple effect outward, like the stone thrown in the pond: wider and wider, more and more encompassing communities are formed”. As a small group, or community, forms as a result of participating in a COPI, others are infected by the sense of enablement and become equally empowered either in personal terms or towards their various communities. As a practice COPI encourages individuals to challenge their own assumptions and those of others.

**Electronic Communities**
(Wenger, McDermott et al. 2002) acknowledge the special opportunities that modern technologies afford for the establishment of what they term, ‘distributed communities,’ but warn of the additional difficulties encountered in trying to establish and sustain such communities, suggesting they present a special challenge. Geographical and social distance can make it difficult for participants to ‘connect’ one with another and social presence and visibility are acknowledged as difficulties. It can be difficult to sustain purposes and members are more inclined to pursue different and perhaps contradictory agendas. Building the community online and growing participation can therefore be
especially difficult. Questions of design for online research communities can draw on the heritage of e-learning approaches from these early constructivist approaches to the shared and collaborative generation of knowledge (Hiltz 1994; Paulsen 1995), through examples that stressed the need for active examination of real problems (Grabinger and Dunlap 1996) and more recent orthodoxies that stress the importance of fostering collaboration and group interaction through effective moderation (Salmon 2000) or efforts to foster a sense of shared purpose and community (Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2004). In all cases, such communities rely to a unique extent on discussion as a medium for the exploration of ideas and the building of knowledge. Without effective discussion, such communities do not and cannot work: discussion is the glue that holds them together and the fuel that drives them forward.

Design should foster a sense of personal presence and proactivity in the virtual network space. The participants can be encouraged to see themselves as networked scholars actively engaged in the business of making sense of experiences and building shared community knowledge (Oblinger and Rush 1997).

Such a model puts the student-researcher centre stage in overlapping physical and virtual webs of connections designed to support the development of new understandings. Developmental activities within such a design thus stress:

- individual exploration – self directed study and investigations;
- apprenticeship – learning in the company of experts;
- group and co-operative learning – following emergent themes;
- the coordinator as a guide, adviser and specialist helper;
- content which is changing quickly and continuously; and
- a rich and diverse range of materials and experiences.

Community problem solving and solution building in richly resourced e-learning spaces characterise the Rich Environments for Active Learning (REALS) approach to online environment design promoted by Grabinger and Dunlap ((Grabinger and Dunlap 1996; Grabinger and Batty 1998; Grabinger and Duffield 1998).

REAL designs for online communities attempt to provide environments which:
• Promote study and investigation within authentic contexts (i.e. realistic, meaningful, relevant and information rich).

• Encourage the growth of individual and community responsibility, initiative, decision-making and intentional learning.

• Cultivate collaboration amongst participants.

• Utilize generative learning techniques which:
  - promote higher order thinking processes, to help participants integrate old knowledge with new knowledge; and to
  - develop rich and complex knowledge structures.

Distributed communities working in REALS require activities designed to promote active and exploratory discussion and build on certain principles that need to be built into the design of activities (Brookfield and Preskill 1999).

Activity Theory
This theoretical perspective has developed from the work of Vygotsky and particularly his student/colleague Leont'ev (Leont'ev 1981). It highlights many of the features we have already identified in this paper. In particular, it brings together the notion of community and the goal-directed actions of the individuals engaged in specific activities. For example, in our own context, the object could be increased research capacity; the community is educational practitioners; mediating artefacts are papers, questionnaires, establishment of new practices; the division of labour might entail that some people have the tasks of establishing practices and others of disseminating them. The subject is the individual engaged in goal-directed tasks that are subordinate to the overall activity. Recent developments of the theory highlight the “double-binds” – or contradictions and tensions – that inevitably emerge in complex practices involving a division of labour. Perhaps the rules that govern the community might also get in the way of achieving the object. Some would argue, for example, that the level of accountability for quality in education is interfering with the practitioners’ ability to provide good quality education.

Engeström is particularly interested in the situations that arise when two or more activity systems coincide, with new objects derived from the combined outcomes (Engeström 1999). In our context, for example, the apparent shared object of increased research capacity might relate to an institution wishing to optimise funding and a community of practice wishing to support school teachers. If the mediating artefacts that result in increased research capacity to support teachers actually cost more money than the activity brings in, then there could be a problem. It is when a point of tension or contradiction arises that an activity system is most likely to evolve or develop. Moreover, these effects can be seen not just at the level of society, but at local level. The idea is that the fundamental societal relations and contradictions of the given socioeconomic formation – and thus the potential for qualitative change – are present in each and every local activity of that society. For researchers enquiring into the problems of the classroom, the theoretical perspective of activity theory may be a useful one. Daniels (2004) suggests that it offers a “language of description” that allows a more explicit way of talking about classroom practice and also points the way to interventions, though it does require further development itself to be used fully. It
has proved to be useful for an enquiry into the whole notion of communities of enquiry – and some links between theory and practice will be established in our final section on recommendations.

**Building communities of educational enquiry?**

How then can these theoretical ideas inform the practical development of communities of educational enquiry? While writers such as Wenger (2002) have been explicit in prescribing the essential steps in creating a community of practice, others have not. Drawing on the theories outlined above and a thorough analysis of relevant literature, this section of the paper presents a distillation of some of the key factors which the authors feel are crucial considerations in the development of communities of enquiry in an educational research context. Seven themes or ‘factors’ emerged from an iterative process of progressive filtering which involved sharing interpretations of selected sources over a series of meetings, video-conferences and e-discussions: (1) Participation/dialogue; (2) relationships; (3) perspectives; (4) context; (5) climate; (6) purpose; and (7) control. Each of these factors will now be interrogated by the theoretical perspectives outlined above. In addition, some reflections of the authors of their experience of forming a community of enquiry to carry out this work are presented. These are intended to exemplify and illustrate the factors in question. The explication and illustration of the seven factors provides the basis for a ‘toolkit’ intended to be used by those who wish to build a community of educational enquiry.

**Participation & Dialogue**

In order to participate in a community it is necessary for people to have access to the community and opportunities for both dialogue and thinking. Access to a community requires appropriate levels of knowledge about the discourses within which its dialogues operate. Dialogue requires access to physical (or virtual) and mental space. This may include periods of silence, to allow for the necessary thinking or internalisation (Vygotsky 1934/1987). Dialogue and internalisation allow for the co-construction of knowledge and, if the conditions are right for the appropriate levels and qualities of dialogue to occur. Boreham and Morgan (2004) argue for dialogue ‘as the foundational process by which organisations learn and interpret dialogue’ in terms of Russian social cultural theory which sees dialogue as a set of cultural practices which constitute a common world by creating shared meanings. Bakhtin (1981) describes the social world as a plurality held together by dialogue conducted according to principles such as willingness to listen, respect for others and openness to alternative interpretations.

In terms of participation Communities of Practice are informal, self-organising groups and include members who self-select themselves. (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). The domain, the community and the practice represent different aspects of participation. They can be the motivating force for joining, for example some may participate because the want to see the domain developed, others participate because of the sense of community with like-minded colleagues, and others might simply want to learn about the practice aspect of the domain. However, there are also other forms of participation such as peripheral participation. Peripheral participation is essential to effective Communities of Practice. It includes those people who are watching and learning from the Community of Practice’s activity at a distance.
Activity Theory has a different emphasis, focusing on action mediated by the use of tools in a given context. Human beings not only act upon their environment through the use of tools, they also think and learn with tools. The most important shared tool in most communities (activity systems) is language. Dialogue is critical in Activity Theory since the basic unit of analysis is not the individual but the activity system, i.e. the functioning collaborative community of individuals who interact and learn through their joint activity. Participation in an activity system is defined in terms of dialogue and internalization.

Dialogue is central and the primary vehicle for the formation of Community in COPI. Within COPI there are three rules pertaining strictly to dialogue. When participants contribute during a session, their input begins with the phrase ‘I agree with… because…’ or ‘I disagree with… because…’. This is a shorthand way of noting valid arguments or fallacies within the dialogue and of making connections between contributions. There is no search for a consensus or conclusion within the dialogue as thinking and reasoning and wondering continues for individuals even after a session has come to an end. Further, one is not permitted to use any technical language or jargon in one’s contributions. There is a range of reasons for this; in the first instance, people may find it easy to hide behind technical terminology. In barring technical language speakers are forced to find a common language, one that is not exclusive and which encourages others to participate and engage in the dialogue. Participants, too, must work harder to say what they mean and mean what they say without resorting to the confines of their disciplines or areas of expertise or specialist knowledge. Just as one must aim to communicate in plain language, it is necessary that as a speaker one is conscious of the meaning such jargon may carry or the assumptions embedded within such terms. Similarly, within COPI one is aware of the assumptions underlying words or phrases within everyday usage and these too may be examined. While one may be part of a COPI one need not necessarily speak in order to participate. The silence of the Community is a key feature within the dialogue and often plays a vital role, however, an individual participant, too, may remain silent. It cannot be assumed that because an individual is not contributing outwardly that they are not reflecting on the dialogue itself and that the individual’s life is not being influenced or affected by the dialogue. Indeed, for some participants it takes some time for them to feel they want to or are able to contribute outwardly to the dialogue and, likewise, others take time to realise and appreciate the need for and importance of silence. One should also be aware that not all topics under examination will appeal equally to all members of the Community, so some may participate more on occasions than others.

Within online or virtual communities participation is open to all regardless of geography or circumstance and necessarily takes the form of discussion or dialogue. However stimulating and sustaining participation is identified as a problem in many studies of virtual communities. Henri and Pudelko (2003) describe four types of virtual community, distinguished according to their degree of cohesion and intentionality, as communities of interest, goals, learners or practice, while others report that fear of criticism, of misleading the community, or lack of trust are barriers to participation in knowledge building and sharing activities (Ardichvili, Page et al. 2003). These studies confirm earlier accounts of low participation in computer mediated communication (CMC) learning environments (Mason and Kaye 1989; Greenberg 1991; Baecker 1993; Kaye 1993; Carswell 2000; Ho 2002). Other studies report that
groups online often find it difficult to reach closure or consensus (Adrianson and Hjelmquist 1991). These difficulties are exacerbated when overlaid with cultural considerations and unresponsive technologies (McLoughlin 1999), but the prospect of harnessing online tools for research (Menon 2002), building distributed understandings (Salomon 1997), exploring multiple perspectives and networked scholarship (Oblinger and Rush 1997) in service of collaborative research and knowledge building networks (Hildreth and Kimble 2004) continues to excite enthusiasm and demands attention. The advent of socio-constructivist approaches to the design of online environments brings the realisation of this promise all the closer (Jonassen, Peck et al. 1999), but reinforces the message that environment design must be carefully considered.

Within writers groups the group encourages participation in an important academic activity, even when individual members sometimes have had problems in engaging previously; it offers opportunities for both dialogue and thinking time, both of which are vital components of the processes.

Reflection

To a certain extent our group was self-selecting as some responded to an initial invitation for expressions of interest, however, others were invited because of their specific area of expertise.

The way our group has conducted its dialogue or discussions has been similar in some ways to a COPI. Any technical language or jargon has been explained and any other ambiguous terms have been defined in order to create a shared understanding that enables the rest of the discussion/dialogue to proceed. Members have been reflective in terms of how meaning is created by what is said – or not – and assumptions of our own or implied by our institutions, the project or external and relevant bodies have been explored. There has been no search for a conclusion – beyond individual pieces of writing – and it has become increasingly clear that the more we discuss, the more there is still to be challenged and discussed. This has generated a dynamic within the group.

Relationships

Within any developing community there will be internal (members) and external (readers, funding bodies and other “stakeholder’s relationships). The relationships within the community are likely to be influenced by cultural perspectives and there may be other variables, such as gender and learning style preferences. Within writers groups relationships within the community can depend on the extent to which participants “buy in” to the processes offered; the opportunity to engage in talking about one’s own writing in a “safe” environment is usually very much valued and that has to depend on the trust that develops between participants (supported by ground rules established by the facilitator). For a Community of Practice the quality of the relationships within will determine the degree to which it achieves its desired purpose. It is critical that the group develops a deepened sense of trust which facilitates critical debate. How this is done and the degree to which this is achieved will depend upon the participants within the group. The number of participants within the community of practice will have an impact upon this. The Community of Practice needs enough people to sustain a critical mass for a rich dialogue without being too large to inhibit the quality of internal relationships. Relationships are represented in and through and created by the exchange of ideas and information. Community value, and the status of
the individual depend on the perceived quality of his or her contribution to the community’s goals.

Within COPI relationships are partly the result of the Community and Community is partly the result of the relationships between the participants. Relationships within the Community construct the very nature of that Community and it is through this that the dialogue emerges. The COPI is an egalitarian forum where no one individual is afforded any more status than any other, everyone participates on an equal footing. In promoting this aspect of COPI, individuals' contributions are valued and none are set apart as an authority figure. This is evident too in the seating arrangements; all participants sit in a circle where each chair is equidistant to its neighbour and so no-one is set apart from the rest of the Community as either an authority or in order to subvert a participant's contribution. Dialogue can only emerge if participants work together. COPI is a practice and is truly interactive and cooperative in nature. There is one individual, however, who is outwith the group and, some may suggest, outwith the Community – the facilitator whose role is to oversee the inquiry and whose loyalty is certainly to the dialogue rather than the participants. S/he does not offer ideas for examination or investigation but may request clarification or further explanation; there is no place for a personal agenda in the facilitator's role. Instead, as the facilitator will have a philosophical background and training in the practice of COPI, her/his role is to ensure the dialogue remains philosophical and works to juxtapose styles of thinking or philosophical perspectives in the selection of speakers in order that the dialogue maintains some kind of forward momentum and dynamic. The role of the facilitator may borrow from Socrates’ metaphor when he described himself as a midwife in his helping others to bring their ideas to bear.

According to Activity Theory relationships between the members of the community are also part of the description, particularly covered under “division of labour” which is what allows human beings to engage uniquely in activities as opposed to instinctive co-operative behaviour; relationships are also governed by mediating tools, especially language and artefacts which embed shared meanings. Since the basic unit of analysis is the activity system and not the individual, the pattern of social interactions and the interrelationships that characterise a group are centrally important to Activity Theory. Learning occurs as a function of social interaction or joint activity in a given context. Of course, each participant brings to any given community her or his own unique history of diverse involvements with diverse others from their participation in many different activity systems. This has a direct influence on the ways in which they negotiate new ways of joint working in any new context. AT envisages division of labour and hence ascribes different roles to individuals within any activity system. In this respect it is distinct from COPI where essentially all members are seen as having equal roles and status (with the exception, of course, of the facilitator of the community who has a singular, distinctive role). Clearly the potential diversity of roles will have a significant bearing on the pattern of interrelationships in any community.
Reflection
Some of us wanted to make a statement about respect for persons. However, we agreed that there can be occasions where it is not the individual person who counts but the idea, and that comes from the community itself. Yet mutual trust plays a big role, as we emphasise below and in this sense respect for persons is a crucial factor.

Perspectives (and assumptions)
The discussion on relationships, and the associated reflection, highlights the need to make perspectives and assumptions explicit. One feature of academic “tribes” may be that their norms are in the “tacit dimension” (Polanyi 1966) that is, experts in the discipline all recognise and act on them, but do not necessarily know that they are doing so. When interdisciplinary groups begin to form, these norms may arise as problematic. A number of perspectives may compete – intellectual, stakeholding/interest and philosophical traditions. The holders of different perspectives may have different aims and thus be engaged in different activities. However new assumptions arise through shared perspectives, possibly drawing on a shared history with reference points back for example to earlier meetings. As a group begins to develop, various “in-group markers” (Cutting 2000) develop such as in-jokes and a reduced need to explain what is being said. These perhaps point to the emerging community. In writers’ groups he varying perspectives brought to the group are thus usually beneficial; occasionally the practices can be seen to clash with the precepts of academic “tribes” or an individual’s preferences; it is usually the case that if the process doesn’t suit people, they will withdraw rather than attempt to subvert the process, but it can be disruptive if they prefer to stay.

The perspectives (and assumptions) of a Community of Practice will depend upon the type of Community of Practice established. This relates to the concept of ‘academic’ tribes’ which discussed above. Participants will need to address issues such as language conventions, methods of enquiry, resolution of internal disputes, power relations and the generation of shared understandings. This can be viewed as a catalyst for learning to be embraced by the Community of Practice. COPI can only encourage participants to acknowledge, value and build upon the contributions of others. Participants can be of any age and have any experience. COPI has taken place with five year olds in schools and eighty-five year olds in community centres. The range of perspectives and backgrounds is welcomed and this diversity can only enrich dialogue and broaden the philosophical perspectives. One need not have lived a long, full or exciting life in order to be an adept reasoner or active participant in a COPI. It is the dynamic of the different philosophical perspectives that the facilitator recognises and uses to drive the inquiry forwards. These individual perspectives must draw upon an individual’s assumptions as both a speaking and as a listening member of the Community and it is this in part which affects change.
Reflection

We were concerned that all the relevant perspectives should be appropriately represented in a community of enquiry (e.g. children’s voices). We needed to ensure authentic representation, not necessarily actual participation. But we realised that this was a political perspective on our part. There was a danger that we would become prescriptive about the need for democratic and egalitarian approaches – and we felt the need to acknowledge our own (shared) assumptions here.

Context

There is an issue already emerging from the discussion above over how much structure is imposed on the group. This will depend on the context of the group, what is expected and what constraints they operate under. There is an inevitable tension over structure: should it be tight or loose? Is this imposed from outside, for example by a funding body or other stakeholder or is the structure grown from the emerging community itself? What rules and roles are established for the community, and where are its boundaries and gatekeepers? This latter point has an impact on who has access to the community. Thus the context of the community plays a part in both facilitating and constraining. Constraints might not be imposed; they can arise from the means and modes of interaction available. Thus information technology can be used as a device to reduce some of the constraints of the context; but can also impose some of its own simply because of its own nature. The context for the Writers’ Group is frequently the need to publish and the constraints in finding time to do so; context and rationale for the group’s existence are thus closely intertwined. Each individual within a Community of Practice contribute to determining the context it operates within. This can very considerably. However, although it is acknowledged that outside influences may indirectly shape the group, members are required to be proactive in making decisions.

The context under which COPI happens can be as varied as its participants. Communities have been established in schools, universities, leisure classes in FE colleges, cafes and pubs with its members being academics, psychologists, homeless, drug abusers, school pupils, lawyers, actors, artists, machinists – the opportunities for participation are limitless. The only context or space required is a space large enough for the group to sit in a circle in order that they can see each other and the space to inquire; there are, and can be, no boundaries on the dialogue itself.

Russell (2004) points out that the activity system can be seen as a context for learning but not merely as a ‘container’ in which the learning takes place. The context is a functional system in which each individual’s activity is woven together with that of others mediated by the tools and cultural expectations. Russell (2004) makes the connection between this meaning of context and the derivation of the word ‘text’ from the Greek for ‘weaving’. The interplay among all the strands of the context provides the environment for learning which can be defined as expanding involvement in an activity system.
Reflection
Videoconferencing was useful because it didn’t take up the whole day for a two hour meeting. But the dynamics changed and some of our discussions were less fruitful. It worked better once we really had something to get our teeth into, rather than when we were just getting established.

Climate
The climate emerges from the group interactions and may relate in part to issues of leadership as well as to group dynamics. In a virtual community climate is managed, if at all, by the internal workings of the group and within discussion seen as governed by a necessary tendency to respect, but explore critically the viewpoints of others. In the case of communities of enquiry, it is clear that the climate needs to be appropriate to foster effective enquiry. How that will operate will depend on the purpose of the enquiry. It is possible to have a very productive community of enquiry where all participants have a clear role and status but where there is, for example, by common consent, conceptual and research method leadership. (For a recent example see Torrance’s (2004) account of an enquiry into formative assessment). Within writers groups the climate is established by the facilitator but is also a function of the group dynamics in the room and the needs of the participants; these factors may influence the facilitator’s choice of pairings for discussion, types of task set, extent of techniques and strategies offered based on experience; the ground rules support this climate (such as confidentiality, equal time for discussion of goals and tasks).

The climate is also determined by the group through the development of the ‘community’. Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002:45) offer a number of useful questions to support the development of a sense of community which will effect the group’s climate.

The community element needs attention, organisation and nurturing: What roles are people going to play? How often will the community meet, and how will members connect on an ongoing basis? What kind of activities will generate energy and develop trust? How can the community balance the needs of various segments of members? How will members deal with conflict? Addressing these types of questions will enable the community to find its specific ways to operate, to build relationships and to grow.

The context under which COPI can take place relates closely to the climate under which participants find themselves. A positive ethos where inquiry is encouraged and actively stimulated is all-important. If the practice is undermined by those allocating time, space or funds, so too are the participants and their respective ideas. Activity systems operate according to rules which range from being clear, formal statements on the one hand, to implicit, unarticulated routines or habits on the other. Essentially within AT rules function to shape the interactions between the individuals in the group and the tools available with the object. Rules will evolve over time as the activity system expands and learns, but any one point in time they permit a degree of stability (albeit temporary) within the system. The ways in which individuals engage with the rules and contribute to the establishment of the rules in the first place might be said to be a function of the ‘climate’ of any group. How dissent and potential conflict is interpreted and handled is an important consideration. Clearly conflict has the potential to be a source and driver of learning, but handled less constructively it can destroy relationships and undermine the whole system. It is important to have the
opportunity to share initial assumptions in an unthreatening and supportive environment in order to create the conditions for growth.

Purpose
Communities develop for a range of purposes. For the present study, we are only concerned with the types of community that generate and sustain enquiry. This will entail a loyalty to an enquiry-based dialogue. Some communities of enquiry might be more interested in change, some in understanding. Some will have networking as their main purpose; others will attend to the dialogue/enquiry for its own sake. These purposes are not mutually exclusive. Individuals may possibly have their own motivations and purposes; for example, for some there will be more pressure to be published, while others are keen to engage in the enquiry simply for intellectual interest or to improve their professional competence. Moreover, as an enquiry develops, greater clarity about purpose is often achieved. As Dewey (1916, 104) argued, our aims or ‘ends-in view’ often change as we approach them:

“We have spoken as if aims could be completely formed prior to the attempt to realise them. This impression must now be qualified. The aim as it first emerges is a mere tentative sketch. The act of striving to realise it tests its worth…. Usually, at least in complicated situations, acting upon it brings to light conditions which have been overlooked. This calls for revision of the original aim. An aim therefore must be flexible; it must be capable of alteration to meet circumstances.”

Many communities of educational enquiry, including that of the authors of this paper, will have the dual purposes of: building knowledge and enhancing practice through research and of building research expertise and understanding. The purpose of the Writers’ Group is to support individuals in achieving their own goals; they are not therefore engaged in an identical activity, yet the individual members do develop a sense of accountability to the group.

The purpose of COPI is for the purpose of inquiring. This purpose is communal and goes a large way to creating Community as opposed to a discussion group. There is no desire to come to any conclusion or consensus, so any by-product such as enhanced self-esteem or bolstered confidence is a bonus. The value of this practice is for the sake of the practice; it is valuable in and of itself. Certainly one may form a group as a facilitator with other aims in mind such as trying to engender participation in local community, facilitating and creating aesthetic awareness, to offer empowerment for the disenfranchised or to promote inter-community or inert-working relationships, however, this would rarely be the reason a Community is established but it may be the way to have a Community of Philosophical Inquiry project funded.

From the work of Vygotsky, the concept of learning ‘object’ is taken to mean the raw material or the problem space on which individuals in a community act using the various tools at their disposal. In other words the object is the focus of activity of the group. It is important to consider that the object or purpose is heavily influenced by culture and history of the group. For the activity system to operate there has to be a shared purpose at least to some extent in order to provide the collective motivation for shared action. However, it is very important to consider the inevitable differences in understanding, the tensions and the conflicts which derive from individuals’ unique personal histories which they bring to any situation. These can be the key to creative
growth within a community. The actual outcome of the collective activity may either be
as anticipated or come as a surprise to the group, but what is critically important is that
at any one point in time there is a shared focus within the group for it to function. If
individuals are disengaged or feel disenfranchised from the group they will not be able
to benefit from being part of an expanding, learning community, nor will they be able
to function as members of the community.

The purpose of the group is defined by the domain and the domain is critical to
community development. Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002:45) provide some
useful questions for shaping the domain.

‘A community must ask itself: What topics and issues do we really care about? How is
the domain connected to the organizations strategy? What is in it for us? What are the
open questions and the leading edge in our domain? What kind of influence do we
want to have? Addressing these types of questions will help a community develop a
shared understanding of a domain, find its legitimacy in the organization, and engage
the passion of its members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Why have we been finding this difficult? Initially, because we came from different
backgrounds, we tried to bring our own disciplinary knowledge to what we saw was
our main task. It took some time to establish what the purpose of our literature review
was. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Issues of loose and tight structure have already been introduced under “context” and
will be fostered through the developing climate of the community. These points raise
further questions about where the power lies in the community; who has control over
its practices, products and dissemination? In terms of a community of researchers,
there are some obvious sources of power such as funding bodies, institutional
hierarchies and research assessment exercises. Academic journals are sources of
considerable control over what can be disseminated and how. And once people are
published, they may become the new “authorities”. The tribes and territories already
referred to will exercise their own control and there may be tensions between an
educationalist’s loyalty to Education and to their other academic tribe(s). The issue of
control can determine who has access to the community, how its relationships should
be conducted, what assumptions can be tolerated, how it can operate (for example, its
resources and constraints), and the extent to which its purpose can be supported.

However, while the aim of communities of enquiry is to foster certain types of
dialogue, it should also be remembered that dialogues can themselves be sources of
hidden power (Fairclough 1989). Boreham & Morgan (2004) emphasise this point
drawing attention to the arguments of Vince (2001): ‘power relations are crucial for
organisational learning..’ (and so we would argue for communities of enquiry)
because they ‘..directly mediate interpretive processes within organisations’. Boreham
& Morgan argue that organisational learning depends on employees relating to each
other in way that enables all points of view to be expressed and which gives
everybody access to a common knowledge base. And they provide an example of
procedural changes which enabled a clear change in power relationships and access
to knowledge.

18
The control of the Writers’ Group is determined by the facilitator, who offers a range of techniques and strategies; however, there is some looseness in the structure – the techniques can be adapted for local conditions and participants frequently report adapting the practices to suit their own preferences; in this sense, the Group retains much of its own control; it also offers – where it can – support against external constraints and controls that may prevent writing. But this can still leave considerable intellectual freedom and scope for initiative and leadership whereby through collective activity co-workers transcend the boundaries which separate them from their colleagues, establish a common and expanded understanding of the object of their joint activity and a collective decision about how to achieve it.

Control within a community of practice is determined by the group itself. All Communities of Practice depend upon leadership within the group. However, healthy communities share that leadership across the group. Healthy communities also rely on members taking on a number of other roles which relies on collaboration rather than competition as the group moves toward its desired domain. What knowledge to share, develop, document? What kinds of learning activities to organise? How should the knowledge repository be organised to reflect the practice of members and be easily accessible? When should processes be standardised and when are the differences appropriate? What development project should the community undertake? Where are the sources of knowledge… outside the community? These are the kinds of questions that will help the community intentionally become an effective knowledge resource to its members and to other constituencies that may benefit from its expertise (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002).

Activity Theory sees individuals as active agents within any activity system, but the extent to which that agency is expressed in terms of control is both “afforded” (facilitated) and constrained by the social relationships, by the tools available and by the history, values and cultural expectations which shape the collective activity. Individual roles and power relationships are continually being negotiated and re-negotiated, so it could be said that control is not a fixed characteristic of the members of any community. However, the previous history and norms of any group may lead to more or less flexibility in terms of power and control. In COPI responsibility for overall control of the structure of a session lies with the facilitator, although as the Community is formed the participants take some responsibility also. When a COPI meets within an establishment or is funded by an external body, it cannot be denied that there may be an element of control in terms of power relations and the ability to stop the Community from meeting but not necessarily from existing.

Summary and conclusions
There is an abundance of literature which informs the concept of a community of educational enquiry. Analysis of this literature has yielded several factors which we suggest should be considered when attempting to build and sustain such a community of enquiry. These are offered together with some key questions which might serve to focus discussion among participants in any putative community of educational enquiry:

(1) Participation and Dialogue
Who will participate, what forms can participation take and how will dialogue be facilitated within the community?

(2) Relationships
What roles will be adopted by participants, will there be division of labour and how will the quality of interpersonal relationships be nurtured?

(3) Perspectives and assumptions
How will initial assumptions and different individual perspectives be made explicit and how will the community develop shared perspectives while valuing the potential of distinctive individual viewpoints on issues of shared concern?

(4) Context
What conditions will facilitate, and what will constrain the development of the community? Should the rules, roles and structure of the community be imposed or allowed to grow from the community itself?

(5) Climate
How will a positive collaborative ethos be established and sustained in which the contribution of all participants is clearly valued?

(6) Purpose
What form of enquiry is to be sustained and what exactly is to be the focus of the enquiry?

(7) Control
Where does power reside within the community, to what extent are the roles and rules established by collaboration and consensus and how tightly or loosely are these defined?

A number of other important questions may be worthy of consideration in any attempt to nurture and organise a community of enquiry. These would include: How often will the community meet, and how will members connect on an ongoing basis? What kind of activities will generate energy and develop trust? How will members deal with conflict? In conclusion, addressing these kinds of questions along with considering the seven factors identified above will, we would suggest, enable a community of educational enquiry to find its own ways to operate, to build relationships and to grow.

References


