

Police, politics and democratic learning communities in Higher Education

Tom Lunt

University of Surrey

t.lunt@surrey.ac.uk

Dr Tom Lunt is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Events Management at the University of Surrey.

Abstract

This paper suggests a different way of theorising the concept of learning community as it relates to digital literacy, social capital and student engagement in Higher Education. Drawing on the work of Quinn (2005) and Rancière (1991, 2010) to examine texts created by students and staff in interviews and in their VLE, the normative discourses of learning community and student engagement are problematized and the role of digital literacy in group work analysed. The paper suggests the term Democratic Learning Community (DLC) as an alternative to the normative and consensus driven discourses of learning community and student engagement prevalent in higher education. DLCs recognise the presence of political subjectification, dissent and resistance that will contribute insight to those involved in teaching students using digital platforms in Higher Education.

Key words

Student Engagement, Rancière, Learning Communities

Introduction

This paper's objective is to suggest an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the nature and dynamics of learning communities in Higher Education (HE). In particular, the role of digital literacy is analysed in relation to the dynamics of group work. In doing so the paper seeks to offer practitioners and managers in HE insights that will be useful in guiding future approaches to teaching in learning communities in HE as they relate to digital literacy and student engagement (SE).

The term learning community has become a normative and valorised ideal in HE institutions. A good example of this is the work done by Tinto (1997) who argues for

a focus on teaching practices in the classroom as a site of SE through collaborative learning and pedagogy. Like learning community, SE has also become a dominant discourse relating to teaching and learning in HE and both are closely associated with issues of student retention and persistence. Furthermore, Bryson (2014) suggests that in engaging students, staff in HE should create opportunities for students to develop their social and cultural capital. More recently, Hardy and Bryson (2016) argue that where relationships between students and staff are strong, students are more resilient and likely to persist in their studies.

Any discussion of learning community and SE cannot ignore the transformative discourse relating to technology and digital literacy. Reports by the UK-based Joint Information Systems Committee (2004, 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) demonstrate the trajectory of this discourse and its claims to agency in pedagogic transformation. At the same time the discourses of SE and technology are increasingly contested both by those who suggest technology may be as much as diversion as a tool for engagement (Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham, 2016) and those who argue for more participatory and democratic approaches to SE (Henderson, Selwyn, & Aston, 2015). For clarity, the term digital literacy is defined as the ability to find and use information and goes beyond this to cover communication, collaboration and teamwork, social awareness in the digital environment, e-safety and the creation of new information (Reedy and Goodfellow, 2012:3).

This paper draws on a research project conducted in 2012 with students studying in their second year at London Metropolitan University. Texts from the mixed method case study, specifically discourse analysis of an interview and posts in online forums, are presented here. I suggest that current discourse relating to participatory and democratic approaches should be considered from a Rancièrian (2010; 1999) perspective which uses the concepts of police, politics and the distribution of the sensible to suggest democracy is a disruptive act rather than a stable set of institutions. Such a move has important implications for the understanding of learning communities in HE and associated concepts of SE and digital literacy. The presence of dissent, conflict and difference does not preclude the existence of learning community. Moreover, the recognition that trust and mistrust, cooperation and antagonism may exist simultaneously will lead to what I call Democratic Learning Communities (DLCs) that have the potential to transform student and teacher engagement and learning.

Theoretical Perspectives

The work of Rancière has gained some salience in pedagogical literature (Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Pelletier, 2012). In this article I draw on several key aspects of his thinking; democracy, police and politics which have implications for how the concepts of learning community, student engagement and social capital are theorised in the context of UK Higher Education. Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) define community as a community of practice where people develop a learning partnership to learn from and with each other and use each other's experience to aid their learning. In doing so they join together to understand and overcome the challenges they face individually and collectively. The difficulty facing a learning community is that it establishes ways of doing things, a status quo that leads to inwardness, impermeable boundaries and blindness to new possibilities. Learning community requires individuals to sustain their engagement to learn and help each other, following up on ideas and nurturing social space for learning requires time and commitment (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011:10).

I suggest that learning community is a political concept, a site of both domination and resistance. Bingham and Biesta's (2010) discussion of Rancière's (1995, 35) conception of political subjectification, identity and community is particularly useful in this context. For Rancière, political subjectification is a moment when a new practice takes place or voice is heard in a particular context. Political subjectification is important because it characterises the possibility and nature of change within a given community.

Alongside political subjectification the concepts of police and politics are central in Rancière's thought. For Rancière (1999, 29), police can be defined roughly as the status quo where everyone has a particular, recognisable role to play within a given context. The concept of police is not necessarily a negative and can be applied to learning communities in HE where specific practices and roles such as student and teacher are established. 'Students as Change agents' (University of Exeter, no date) and 'Students as Producers' (University of Lincoln, no date) are examples of positive police work. The concept of police is similar to points sketched above by Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) – communities can have both positive and pathological aspects.

The notion of politics for Rancière is very different: it is "...an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing...Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only a place for noise" (Rancière 1999, 29-30).

For Rancière (2010), education is part of *Le partage du sensible* which is normally translated as the division of the sensible. This is “...an overall relation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of saying” (Bingham and Biesta 2010, 8). However, *partage* may be translated as either division or distribution. While distribution suggests that everything has its place, division through political subjectification may interrupt a particular arrangement of relationships or practices thus addressing the difficulty of status quo that Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) identify.

Rancière thinks in terms of politics – moments when new voices are recognised, however fleetingly. Like Danvers and Gagnon (2014) I examine which student voices are recognized and which are just noise. In this paper I chronicle examples of students’ transgression and resistance in a virtual learning environment (VLE). I argue there is a struggle in this virtual space between police and politics and the fleeting presence of what I call DLC In the notion of DLC I draw on Rancière’s work and suggest implications for HE. Democracy when considered in relation to Rancière is closely bound up with politics it is disruptive of the police order and has potential to transform individual and group identities (Biesta, 2010).

Quinn (2005) suggests that Tinto’s (1997) ideal of learning community has been appropriated by university managers to create a sense of community that refuses to accept difference and dissent while at the same time favouring compliance. In her discussion of learning community Quinn (2005) recognises the broad nature of the term social capital which covers both Putnam’s (1993) consensus based approach and Bourdieu’s (1986) agonistic view of social capital as reproductive of inequality and inhibiting change.

An alternative view of social capital is that of Coleman (1988) who differs from Bourdieu (1986) in that he sees social capital not just as an asset of powerful elites but also as having potential to benefit those in marginalised communities. Unlike Putnam (1995), Coleman (1988) identifies the concept of closure in a community, the way in which relationships are structured between individuals to allow for a set of effective sanctions from which norms emerge that can monitor and guide behaviour in a community.

The concept of closure is important to the analysis of the case study and is discussed in relation to Rancière’s (1991, 1999) notions of police and the distribution of the sensible. Norms and sanctions relate to trust and Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) suggest trust is a key factor in communities of practice and the learning partnerships therein. Trust relates to discipline and the belief that others will be able to make relevant contributions to the community. However, trust is another aspect

of Putnam's (1995) work that has been criticised in that he sees trust as an aggregate indicator of social capital. Moreover, Tzanakis (2013) argues that Putnam (1995) fails to see that democracy can come from non-collaborative, suspicious, non-trusting and conflicting relationships.

Quinn (2005) suggests an alternative notion of social capital that she calls Imagined Social Capital where difference between individuals can exist in a community. In her study of women at a post '92 university, Quinn (2005) suggests that the benefits of community and social capital can elide the idealised and essentially unrealistic vision of belonging to a learning community. The women in Quinn's study experienced exclusion and constructed their own imagined community to belong to. Similarly, Wintrup's (2014) noted a similar practice to Quinn (2005) where student's accounts of making their degree their own, solving problems generated their own form of social capital.

Both Quinn (2005) and Wintrup (2014) have identified an important aspect of social capital that links to Rancière's conception of politics. Furthermore, the nature of the student's engagement in both Quinn (2005) and Wintrup (2014) is of particular relevance to the texts presented below because, as Rancière (2010) suggests, education is part of the unequal order of modern society – *la partage du sensible* (distribution of the sensible). Teaching, explication and lifelong learning are for Rancière (1991, 7) "enforced stultification". Pedagogy starts from a position of inequality between student and teacher (master). The teacher will then work to reduce the inequality through explication. However, such work involves a relationship of dependency between student and teacher and a state of inequality between the student and the teacher. So in discourses of SE (Bryson, 2014; Coates, 2007) it may be that inequality and dependency may be reinforced - the opposite of what is intended - particularly by those who see SE in terms of critical transformation (Kahn, 2014; Zyngier, 2008).

Methodology

This paper is a case study grounded in the texts produced by students. The importance of bounding a case study has been emphasised by Stake (1995) and this might be achieved by stipulating time and place (Cresswell, 1998) time and activity (Stake, 1995) and definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I limited my case study to the related people, processes, and events occurring within a defined place and period of time. Namely, the three teaching staff and 140 students who were registered for the second year (Level 5) module called Planning and

Management of Events (PME) in the Spring Semester of 2012 at London Metropolitan University. The reasons for setting boundaries in this way relate to convenience and access, I was the module leader for PME. Moreover, as stated by Kahu (2011), there is a need for small scale, in depth studies of SE. All names, including my own, are aliases to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The issues of informed consent and my position as an insider researcher presented ethical challenges during the course of this research project. Informed consent in relation to virtual spaces presented some unique problems. Unlike the interviews I conducted, I could not present the students with an (approved) information sheet and consent form about my research with all the appropriate points regarding publication, confidentiality and withdrawal complete with tick boxes and a line for signature and date. The assumption that because someone had posted text in a public forum meant that it could be used for research purposes was deemed unethical because the author of the post did not realise at the time of writing that it might be used for research purposes. Where individuals are posting in private forums or in closed Facebook groups the issue of informed consent is much more sensitive.

To address such tensions I followed Sharf's (1999) suggestions for researchers conducting internet research: the researcher should introduce him/herself and the nature of the research from the outset, should make concerted efforts to contact those who have posted material they wish to use as data and, finally, should seek ways to ensure feedback from those that are being studied. I talked about my work in the first lectures I gave during the module. I placed a message on the sign-up sheet students read prior to joining a forum. The message gave a brief description of my research and included a statement asking students if they were not happy to be part of the research they should contact me directly by email or else it would be assumed that by joining the forum they were consenting to take part. In one case where students allowed me access to a closed Facebook group, I posted a consent form in the Facebook group itself and the students posted their consent back as 'comments' on my original post. These measures were set out in my ethics application forms to both London Metropolitan University and the University of Sussex who authorised data collection for the research.

At the same time, as an insider researcher, issues relating to ethics were evident. As a teacher at the university power relationships became evident, especially during the interviews with both colleagues and students. Colleagues' responses often emphasised there were no problems with the teaching on the module and that everything had gone well, while students who were asked to tell the story of what

happened to them during the module took the opportunity to give feedback and evaluate aspects of the module. It has been argued by Morse (1998: 61) that 'The dual roles of investigator and employee are incompatible, and they may place the researcher in an untenable position.' This tension between roles in insider research is discussed by Brannick and Coghlan (2007) who identify the issues of: access, preunderstanding and role duality which can be related to this study. As an employee I have what Brannick and Coghlan (2007:67) term 'primary access' to the organisation in question. However, I am aware that my secondary access to specific parts of the organisation and privileged knowledge is limited. The area of preunderstanding applies not only to conceptual understanding but also to the '...lived experience of the researcher's own organisation' Brannick and Coghlan (2007:68). In my experience this has been advantageous in that it has been straightforward to design teaching tools online to facilitate the collection of data.

The ease of access, combined with dual roles, did present a significant issue relating to data collection. In my role as a teacher/practitioner I created the spaces, the open discussion forums and private group forums, and encouraged (enforced) their use. For example, if a student emailed me a question that I felt would be useful to all I refused to answer by reply, but insisted rather that the question be posted to the appropriate forum so that all students could benefit from the question and answer. I also suggested that the private forums would be useful for students because when used to record group activities, e.g. notes of meetings, the outputs of seminar work etc., all would be able to access and benefit. More to the point, if someone in a group were not contributing, it would be made obvious from their absence or silence in the private forum. In this way I manufactured the landscape in which the research would be conducted.

For the purposes of this paper I focus on the texts generated in one group's online space and from an interview with one student who was part of the group.

Student interviews followed Wengraf's (2001) Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) that seeks to minimize the concerns of the interviewer and allow the interviewee the fullest possible expression of their systems of value and significance. The interviewer explains that s/he will ask one question to which the interviewee should answer in as much detail as they like. The interviewer states that they will not interrupt in any way during the interviewee's narrative. When the interviewee has finished there is a 10-15min break where the interviewer goes through his/her notes and compiles a list of questions that encourage the interviewee to give more detail on the narrative they have just given. This normally takes approximately 90 minutes.

The texts from the virtual spaces and interviews have been analysed using both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Rancièren (1999) post-structural approach. I weave together texts from the online discussion group and the face-to-face interview to produce composite, linear narratives.

The sampling approach adopted attempts to develop a description of the social aspects and formations of the institution in which the research is situated. In line with CDA (Norman Fairclough, 2010 p.51) I follow a sampling procedure that sketches out how different genres, discourses and styles are configured within the social practices of students working on the module. At the same time I look for relationships among the norms of speech of the community that might signify the ideologically discursive formations present. This process is written as an ethnographic account that identifies interactions where there is tension between ideologies or subjects or which manifests itself as dissensus and resistance.

Findings and Discussion

In this section I present an analysis of a portion of the qualitative data collected for the case study of the module Planning and Management of Events. Presentation of the analysis is supported by extracts from online interactions between students working together as a group and a transcript from an interview with one of the students from that group. The text develops in a linear way over the lifetime of the module. The main aspects of Fairclough (2003) CDA approach that I draw on are detailed below for the reader's convenience.

The aspects of CDA I draw on are types of exchange:

1. Knowledge exchange – eliciting and giving information, making claims and stating facts.
2. Activity exchange – people doing things or getting others to do things.

Four types of speech function:

1. Statements
2. Questions
3. Demands
4. Offers

Three types of grammatical mood (the realisation of meaning in sentence type):

1. Declarative
2. Interrogative
3. Imperative

Fairclough (2003) states that these elements are important in the analysis of research interviews. I also deployed his usage of assumption in relation to ideology. Assumptions help to establish common ground on which communities and social interactions are based. At the same time they are important in the exercise of power and domination. Assumptions may be divided into three types:

1. Existential assumptions – assumptions about what exists
2. Propositional assumptions – assumptions about what is or will be the case
3. Value assumptions – assumptions about what is good or desirable.

My textual analysis initially draws on Fairclough's (2003) approach. In particular I look for instances of modality and evaluation in the texts which indicate what the author is prepared to commit to. Commitment to what is true and necessary relates to modality, commitment to what is good or bad relates to evaluation. I agree with Fairclough's (2003, 164) assumption that, 'what people are prepared to commit themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves.' Fairclough (2003) suggests that there are different types of modality which can be linked to different types of exchange and speech function. I use the following:

1. Knowledge exchange (epistemic modality) statements and questions which show the author's commitment to the truth.
2. Activity exchange (deontic modality) demands and offers which show the author's commitment to act.
3. Modal markers include modal verbs e.g. 'can, will, may, must, would, should' etc. Also modal adverbs such as 'certainly' and modal adjectives like 'required'. Another marker is a mental process statement e.g. 'I think' or affective mental processes such as 'I love this soup'. In this example another important aspect, the use of personal pronouns, is highlighted. This is important because it signals that the evaluation is the author's.

The first text 'Working out what is required' is based on the online conversations between Jennifer and Liz. The two students engage with each other and discuss aspects of the coursework they have been set. In the second text 'Policing non participation', Jennifer challenges another group member, Isobel whom she regards as not contributing to the group work.

Working out what is required

In this text, which is taken from the group's private forum in the VLE, Jennifer and Liz correspond early on in the module (Week 3). They are trying to get to grips with the term, 'model matrix' used in a seminar exercise. The students are required to

present a model matrix as part of a short, assessed presentation in Week 6. They also refer to an online video I posted in the university's VLE in week 2, the week before this exchange takes place:

[VLE Private Forum 19: Lines 32 – 51]

Author: Jennifer

Date: Wednesday, 22 February 2012 19:03:48 o'clock GMT

Subject: Well-being/Feel good Exhibition

<http://www.wellbeing.com.au/> click around at the tabs to get an idea...

<http://www.exhibitions.co.uk> ...something like these exhibitions

I'm guessing that since these exhibitions exist, then this idea has a chance. Also, I just carefully saw and listened to Lecture 2, and it is very thorough about the feasibility study. I just want to note something that I hadn't realised: the comparison of the models is being done on the *models* NOT on the *ideas*. I hope I'm right about this; that's what I understood anyway.... I'll ask Ben on Monday just to be clear. I'll post something about tourism colleges/UNIs or colleges/UNIs in general. Marie, if you can point me in any direction, that'd be great. Also something weird is happening and it kicks me out of the databases in Library Services. That's why I haven't put any research links.

Jennifer opens her post with hyperlinks to events that are relevant to the group's coursework. She is trying to continue a conversation that started elsewhere and makes a demand 'click around. I am guessing' is a tentative declarative clause, Jennifer is looking for colleagues' affirmation of her ideas around a Well-being exhibition. 'I just carefully saw and listened to lecture 2...I just want to note'. The use of 'just' also reduces her level of authority in the text. Jennifer is assertive and uses first person declarative statements to set out what she is doing in relation to the assignment. She has focused on a point that she is unsure about and uses italics and capitals to emphasise her point about models and ideas. There is a discourse marker '...that's what I understood anyway' that leads into what she will do to verify her understanding. 'Marie, if you can point...' this is the second demand Jennifer makes in this post. However, the use of the conditional makes it more tentative, perhaps because it is directed at a specific individual. Jennifer is cautiously setting out a position of leadership.

Jennifer's post can be seen in Rancière's (1999) terms as police work and part of the distribution of the sensible. She is conforming to, but also demanding, a particular way of doing, saying and being from the students in her group. These are defined by

normative conceptions of SE that require visible activity in this instance: written responses in the group's Private Group Forum (PGF), attendance and group meetings and the completion of work required to complete the course work. Moreover, she positions the tutors as 'knowing', to explain points of uncertainty. I suggest this final point is what Rancière (1991) would see as a form of dependency that creates hierarchy, rather than assuming equality, and is particularly important in the following exchanges between Jennifer and Liz:

[VLE Private Forum 19: Lines 54 - 80]

Author: Liz

Date: Wednesday, 22 February 2012 21:03:14 o'clock GMT

Subject: RE: Well-being/Feel good Exhibition

So..I am thinking if there are already well being/healthy living exhibitions then that would be a reason to not do this as there is already lots of competition? and with regard to the models I thought we had to compare the ideas based of different areas (financial, competition, marketing, etc)

Liz's response is tentative, use of mental process 'So..I am thinking' and interrogative mood opens her direct question to Jennifer regarding the Feelgood exhibition. She uses a mental process again to address Jennifer's point about ideas and models. Liz also uses 'we' to refer to the group's effort, this may be an attempt to resolve and overcome difference. This dialogical approach contrasts with Jennifer's first post and in her response:

Author: Jennifer

Date: Thursday, 23 February 2012 17:11:25 o'clock GMT

Subject: RE: Well-being/Feel good Exhibition

Well, not exactly. It is acceptable for two or three or more shows to have similar topic. The thing that we have to do is to find an "X" factor, the thing that makes our event idea different from the others. It is very difficult in our day and age to find an idea that is original, and has never been done before. And who knows, maybe these "competitors" aren't doing so well. With our idea, we might be offering something different.

Also, I just contacted Ben via email, to ask him to clear the model matrix up. I thought the same thing that you do and maybe that's the case. It's just that I

got confused with what Bill Green was saying at Lecture 2. Frankly, I'd prefer it if you were right.

Jennifer's disagreement with Liz shows a high level of commitment that is maintained in similar declarative statements, 'It is' and 'we have to'. However, in her concluding comments Jennifer is more tentative and shows less commitment for example, 'And who knows'. In doing so she tries to avoid contradicting Liz too harshly. Using the discourse marker 'Also' Jennifer reverts to declarative statements about what she has been doing. She seems to seek consensus through the mental process, 'I thought the same thing as you'.

The dialogic nature of conversation as Jennifer and Liz discuss their understanding of a method shows intense engagement (Coates, 2007). It is worth noting the conversational nature of the exchanges in these posts – both knowledge and activity exchanges occur as do strategic and communicative action. In contrast to Jennifer, Liz takes up a position that evaluates and interrogates the issues that Jennifer raises. In the conversation, mental process statements e.g. 'I am thinking' show the writer's subjective level of commitment to a particular position or idea. I suggest that Liz's attempt to explain the problem of the model matrix is an example of political subjectification (Rancière, 1999). She starts from a position of assumed equality; not looking to the tutor to explain the problem, she does so herself. However, the strength of the police order and the distribution of the sensible are shown in Jennifer's response that immediately refers back to the tutor.

Policing non participation

Jennifer volunteered to be interviewed for this research project. In her narrative Jennifer describes some problems her group faced, this is followed by extracts from Jennifer's private group forum which good example of frustration and policing that her narrative glosses over:

[Interview Jennifer 14/5/12 - line 9]

e: and I think that we yeah e: e:m what else Ok, and the other problem we had... was specifically in our group of course, that... half the group migrated to, away from the seminar[...]so we got into a whole procedure of e:m, taking up roles with the initial exercise, e:m we formed the supposedly perfect team [...] then another person appeared in week three and she got into our group without following the procedure which that person disappeared as it appeared [laughs]... she had some personal problems anyway we just

stopped communicating after a while that's a big issue anyway e:m I think after week 4 or 5... I think after week 5 maybe we were still struggling with the idea...

The mental process 'I think' and evaluative statements she also describes the difficulties of the changes in the team membership and these intertwine with the settling of what their event idea would be. The discourse marker 'anyway' distances and shifts attention from the 'disappeared' student to the problem of selecting an event idea. By using 'we' Jennifer positions the problem as the group's.

Jennifer describes the turbulence at the beginning of the semester with students moving between seminars which impacts on the process of group formation. In referring to the 'supposedly perfect team' Jennifer is alluding to a seminar activity which involved students completing a Belbin (2010) role type questionnaire as part of the formation of student teams. There is a cynicism/irony that misreads the purpose of the seminar activity. Thinking about Belbin role types as criteria for forming groups was not a recipe for perfection but an exercise in getting students to think about their own and other students' roles within a team. The Belbin exercise constitutes police work and in this instance failed as part of the careful preparation of students for group work suggested by Bryson and Hardy (2014)

Jennifer briefly mentions how 'another person' - Isobel - joined the group late and then "disappeared". Isobel's departure is attributed to 'personal problems' and that communication between her and the group ceased. Jennifer doesn't refer to Isobel by name, she does conclude that it was a 'big issue'. How big is seen in the interactions within the group's private forum. In the following excerpt Jennifer expresses frustration with Isobel, directly challenging her lack of contribution:

[Private Group Forum 19: lines 208 – 218]

Author: Jennifer

Date: Tuesday, 6 March 2012 09:37:59 o'clock GMT

Subject: To Isobel

Well, Isobel, once more you failed to do something (anything!) within the allocated group tasks. It is now week 5 and you haven't contributed a single thing in this group.

We counted on you to do a portion of the work (research ticket prices) so that we can do the budget today. Your performance within the group has been absent. I am very disappointed with you and worried about the rest of

us who try to do the tasks given, even if they confuse us and even if they are difficult.

Jennifer's use of the temporal 'once more' followed by a strong evaluation verb 'failed' is a very aggressive opening. Jennifer makes no attempt to modulate the grounds for her accusation that Isobel has continually failed to contribute to the group tasks. The, 'something (anything!)' is particularly pointed. Jennifer's temporal reference to Week 5 strengthens her criticism of Isobel. Jennifer's criticism and forceful evaluation of Isobel is constructed as coming from the group; 'we counted on you / performance in the group has been absent'. Jennifer then switches to 'I am very disappointed with you'. The move from 'we' to 'I' strengthens the attack. Jennifer places Isobel's failure to contribute in the context of the group and then personally. There is no attempt to suggest a solution that draws on the resources of the group or beyond the group such as their tutor which is symptomatic of what Putnam (1995) would term weak social capital and confirm Bourdieu's (1986) suggestion that social capital reinforces inequitable and pathological social relationships.

The intensity of Jennifer's attack on Isobel is striking. In challenging Isobel's lack of contribution, Jennifer is aggressive and seemingly economical with the truth about the information she has received from Isobel. This forms part of Isobel's defence, which is a modulated and polite response to Jennifer's aggressive post:

[VLE Private Forum 19: Lines 221 – 235]

Author: Isobel

Date: Wednesday, 7 March 2012 20:39:25 o'clock GMT

Subject: RE: To Isobel

Jennifer,

I think this is a bit rude of you writing this mail, as I did send you a txt message stating that I was at the Accident and Emergency on Monday night after uni and could not meet you and Liz Tuesday morning. By the way before reading this mail I had sent you information answering questions regarding the venue and as stated will get info regarding ticketing price and charge for stall space from research. I know I am putting in my effort as was working with you guys getting the well-being client list in class. Please check you email and please don't attach any rude email as I don't work for you, but with you. Thanks

Author: Isobel

Date: Wednesday, 7 March 2012 20:50:53 o'clock GMT

Subject: RE: To Isobel

Business Design Centre site info.doc

I would also email this doc as it is my 1st time attaching files on the forum. If any contributions or suggestions please let me know. Thanks. Isobel

Isobel defends herself vigorously but modulates her accusation - Jennifer is being 'a bit rude'. Isobel explains she has been in A&E and says she texted to inform Jennifer that she couldn't make the meeting. Furthermore she has contributed information via email prior to this exchange. Isobel refers to her contribution in class which is not mentioned by Jennifer. However, the mental process 'I know' may suggest a lack of self confidence.

Differing levels of digital literacy can clearly be seen in the posts made by Jennifer, Liz and Isobel. Jennifer and Liz are first to post in the PGF. Isobel is last to post in the PGF. In communicating directly with Jennifer via email, rather than through the PGF, she has made herself vulnerable because she hasn't demonstrated to the group that she has been working on her allotted tasks. She tries to counteract this by posting information on the venue she has been researching. However, it is Isobel's resistance to Jennifer through the distinction between work 'with' not 'for' that is particularly striking. In doing so Isobel challenges Jennifer's position of authority and also speaks to the values and difficulties of a distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 1999) where students' working relationships in the university in terms of authority and hierarchy are contingent and discourses of the workplace (employability) shape norms and guide behaviour. They are a form of Rancièrian (1999) police. Isobel makes a claim for equality against hierarchy in the group which I suggest has the potential to be a moment of what Rancière (1999) calls politics – a new voice that challenges the status quo. In the second post, 11 minutes after the first, she attaches information about a venue. Isobel shows less confidence in the PGF as she says that because it is her first post she'll also email the material to the rest of the group. Isobel invites others in the group to contribute.

Marie responds to Isobel's post five days later. Her writing is of particular interest because it gives insight into the dynamics of the group. The text's composition, the switches of subject and style allow insight, through the micro practices of a student trying to resolve conflict, into the nature of learning community and student engagement:

[VLE Private Forum 19: Lines 420 – 452]

Author: Marie

Date: Monday, 12 March 2012 19:24:25 o'clock GMT

Subject: I Information about Excel london

Hello ladies ,
here are some information that i have found about Excel London . I hope it will be useful .

To Isobel:

Jennifer told us about your health issue and we are all concerned about it.

Marie suddenly changes subject and formally addresses Isobel. Her first declarative sentence reports very directly how Jennifer has told the group about Isobel's health problems. By using 'us' and 'we' Marie suggests group togetherness but this could be excluding for Isobel. The nominalization, 'health issue' elides the nature of Isobel's condition. This could be sensitivity on Marie's part, or to negate importance of Isobel's situation.

[post continues]

However, you should understand that they are some works that need to be done by a specific deadline. So when you do not turn up or you do without any kind of research done. It just affects the group and just to remind you , Liz and you are meant to present next week. Since you do have your hospital or GP consultation on Mondays "how will you do that ?"

Marie immediately qualifies the group's concern as the subject changes abruptly to the demands of work deadlines. 'You should understand..' This mental process has strong deontic force— Marie forcefully sets out Isobel's conflicting obligations seeing her GP and obligations, for example by using a direct question in speech marks.

[post continues]

Don't forget that even if we paste things on this forum that it is not really enough for you to understand the whole concept.

Marie uses the imperative, 'Don't forget' to emphasise the importance of physical meetings and dismisses the possibility of keeping up online. This seems to confirm Tinto's (1997) findings regarding classrooms as communities and the embodied nature of learning.

[post continues]

I read your comments and Jennifer ones : As a group member , i am not really happy about this kind of situation. I mean i do understand everybody points here but we are not here to make any kind of judgement or what so ever .

Honestly, as long as i am concerned the only thing that really matter for me is to get this assignment done and submitted on time.

Marie continues to arbitrate, the subjective affective mental process marker 'i am not really happy..' is followed by a nominalisation '...this kind of situation' which avoids a potentially explosive description of the conflict. Two subjective mental process markers are then followed by a strong commitment '...but we are not here to make any kind of judgement...'

Having thus far hedged in an attempt to avoid taking sides, Marie uses the attitude marker 'Honestly', in doing so she takes a clear position - timely submission of the group's coursework is the only thing that matters to her. This is police work, Marie seeks to ensure that everything goes according to plan.

[post continues]

Please just so that you know, i am not picking on you we all rely on each other so everybody participation is really important if and only if we are aiming for a good grade.

The 'Please' request marker calls for understanding, strong commitment in 'I am not picking on you we all rely on each other'. The link between everyone's participation and good grade is made clear and implies that the consequences of non-participation will be a bad grade.

Marie privileges the physical, embodied requirements of the group. Online contributions are not enough. At the same time, she is uncomfortable with the way the group's relationships have developed and she tries to take up a position somewhere between Jennifer and Isobel. In concluding, Marie tries to depersonalise and soften her message by making clear she is focused on getting the assignment in on time and that she is not picking on Isobel. She returns to the theme of the group relying on each other and the necessity of everyone contributing to get a good grade. The next day Jennifer follows up on Marie's post:

[VLE Private Forum 19: Lines 420 – 452]

Author: Jennifer

Date: Tuesday, 13 March 2012 15:21:47 o'clock GMT

Subject: RE: I Information about Excel london

Just to add to what Marie is saying... I think that all of us have the same targets regarding this module, as well as the rest of the modules; that it to pass our modules with success and be proud of it!

The university makes us work together because in the future we will have to do that; they are just preparing us and help us develop our team skills. And in the future, we will have to do things that we don't want to do, but if our jobs depend on it...we'll do them!

Jennifer invokes the powerful agency of the university that requires group work. This is justified by reference to the discourse of preparation for employment. The future lack of agency of individuals as employees is emphasised, 'we will have to do things that we don't want' justified on the basis of having and keeping a job.

Jennifer builds on Marie's post with a sophisticated, argument and rationale for group work in the University context as a preparation for work after graduation. The completion of tasks is presented not as working out of choice but because the alternative will be unemployment, implying that Isobel will be made unemployed from the group. She then links the need to do tasks to the group's reliance on each other. The way in which the group's reliance is foregrounded by Marie and Jennifer resonates with Quinn's (2005) critique of normative discourses of learning community which privilege consensus and are intolerant of difference.

Conclusion

This paper argues that in Higher Education digital literacy has a significant impact on learning community and student engagement. In the case of Jennifer and Liz I suggest that digitally literate students are able to demonstrate high levels of engagement, support and commitment that are congruent with a learning community. At the same time Isobel's lack of digital literacy as shown in her failure to engage fully with the rest of the group via the private group forum led to the high level of student engagement having pathological outcome - Jennifer's attack is intensely antagonistic. This is in stark contrast to the consensual, normative, discourses around digital literacy, student engagement (SE) and learning community typically found in teaching and learning in HE policy discourses. At times, it is

questionable whether the term learning community as framed in Higher Education policy discourse is appropriate to the texts this case study reports.

The student's ability to use the virtual space provided to network shows there is potential for social capital to develop. Jennifer and Liz's collaboration online shows they recognise the potential of networks to solve problems, advance understanding and develop an advantage. At the same time however, opportunities to develop social capital are missed. The student's tutor is referred to but at no time does the tutor engage with the students in their forum moreover, no attempt is made to resolve the issues with Isobel in a supportive way. This suggests a lack of trust and methods of closure (Coleman, 1988) which could be developed by engagement of tutors and students to resolve issues such as those faced by Isobel.

Drawing on Rancière (1999), I suggest that in these interactions between students there is a struggle between police work and politics. In Jennifer and Liz's conversation (*'Working out what is required'*) I argue that Liz's voice is new, and example of politics (Rancière, 1999), momentarily, when she correctly interprets and effectively teaches Jennifer in relation to the seminar exercise. This may be generative of DLC where Imagined Social Capital (Quinn, 2005) exists in the acceptance of difference between individuals who are nonetheless in community. In the same way politics occurs when Isobel resists Jennifer's criticism (*'Policing non participation'*) saying 'I work with you not for you' her voice is new because it pushes back against the normative discourses of employability and compliance that increasingly manifest themselves in Jennifer's posts. However, Isobel's voice is not heard again as she plays no further part in the PGF.

These new voices are exciting because they are politics in Rancière (1999) terms and show potential, if nurtured, to develop into Democratic Learning Communities where high levels of student and staff engagement are present that lead to positive outcomes in relation to learning community and social capital. I suggest that the concept of DLC, as I propose it, is a situation in which dissensus, agonistic and suspicious positions may be taken and accepted as enriching the relationships between students and teaching staff. DLC allows for the growth of new groups that might themselves be communities operating their own forms of social capital.

This paper has several limitations. In particular, there are issues relating to the novelty of online forums being used for teaching purposes in this context. At the time they were not used widely and student and staff engagement with them may have been less because of this and embodied face to face interactions may not have been picked up. Moreover, it is likely that the students used other social media

applications that their tutors were not aware of. However, tutor engagement online will help to ensure positive police work in embodied interactions between students and their tutors. A further limitation is that the students whose texts were used in this study were not able to comment on the interpretations I made on what they had posted.

In relation to future research, the binaries of embodied/digital, community/exclusion and (dis)engagement have significant implications for how digital literacy, student engagement and community are conceived and practiced in Higher Education. Digital literacy is in part about understanding and managing these binaries. Ethnographic research in these spaces, while difficult in terms of consent, might be invaluable to students and teachers as well as managers and policy makers in higher education. In particular, participative action research combined with ethnographic approaches that seek to engage students and teachers in identifying traditional hierarchies and the relationship between police work and politics has the potential to be very valuable to developing Democratic Learning Communities in higher education that celebrate difference and encourage persistence, engagement and social capital.

Note on transcription conventions

I have followed Fairclough's (2003) approach:

1. Pauses, short pauses shown by ... Long pauses shown by a -
2. Voiced pauses (ums and ers) are shown as e: and e:m
3. Where text has been removed to shorten a passage [...]
4. Where speakers overlap each other a new line is started with the speaker's name. For the most part I remained silent in the interviews, occasionally encouraging with 'mmm' and 'yes' etc. I have left these out for the most part as I don't feel they are necessary.
5. I have punctuated the interview extracts, VLE texts are reproduced verbatim.

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