An Examination of Net Community as A Pedagogical Enterprise

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The main purpose of this paper is to examine the pedagogical contexts and Practices of online virtual communities. Specifically, I focus on the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of virtual communities. I argue that virtual communities could reflect and endorse professional middle classes cultural values, which in turn could enhance the effects of the current class structure and undermine the educational significance of cultural diversity. To ensure the openness of virtual communities, it is essential for on-liners to reclaim human agency in the construction of virtual communities.

Keyword: vitual communities, pedagogical enterprise, Internet and CMCS

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The recent movement toward universal access to the Internet has rapidly facilitated our (in) voluntary and frequent involvement in group mailing lists, bulletin board, Internet Relay Chat, and Usenet newsgroups. In this libertarian cyberspace, we establish connections with people who share our interests or concerns. Often, we refer to these sites of social congregation as virtual communities. The very term "virtual communities" implies the elusiveness of these Internet communities. On the one hand, mirage-like "virtual communities" are to be distinguished from traditional "real" communities, which are based on commonalty, face-to-face interaction, and physical proximity. On the other hand, various virtual communities springing from the existing telecommunication infrastructure have initiated and sustained the ongoing transformation of "real" global human society[1]. Jean Baudrillard points out that virtual communities simulate real communities, and such simulation could be "more real than the real." Paul Virilio further claims that virtual communities could replace "real" Communities.[2]

John Deway claims that community, embodying a matrix of human relationship, is a pedagogical enterprise. At macro level, there has been an increasing population dedicated to the continuing development of virtual communities. Concomitantly,School has emerged as a proactive agency, instated to ensure universal access to the Internet thereby prompting the establishment of virtual communities. In view of the flourishing of virtual communities, it is essential for educators to re-examine the continuity and discontinuity in our conceptualization of human communities.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the pedagogical contexts and practices of online virtual communities. Specifically, I focus on the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of virtual communities. I argue that virtual communities could reflect and endorse professional middle classes' cultural values, which in turn could enhance the effects of the current class structure and undermine the educational significance of cultural diversity. To ensure the openness of virtual communities, it is essential for on-liners to reclaim human agency in the construction of virtual communities.

Community as a Pedagogical Enterprise

John Dewey regards education as "the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-man."[3] This process cannot take place in a social vacuum. In view of the interconnections between the words common, community, and communication, Dewey points out that "[M]en live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in

common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common."[4] To Dewey, a spirit of cooperative community is essential in forming our fundamental disposition because a matrix of interactive human relationship facilitates the individual's continuous growth. He argues that "we are born organic beings associated with others, but we are members of a community. The young have to be brought within the traditions, outlook and interests which characterize a community by means of education; by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt associations."[5] In his own words, Dewey stated that, "[E]ducation being a social process, the school is simply that form community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race and to use his own powers for social ends."[6] To Dewey, community is as much processes as it is substance. He argues that " we must take the child as a member of society in the broadest sense, and demand for and from the schools whatever is necessary to enable the child intelligently to recognize all his social relations and take his part in sustaining them."[7]

As discussed above, Dewey Believes that community is a pedagogical enterprise, and educational institutions such as school must function as a "community in microcosm" in order to sustain and improve the larger community. In view of the far-reaching social impacts of virtual communities, it is important to inquire into the pedagogical nature and process of virtual community. Howard Rheingold defines virtual communities as "social aggregation that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."[8] Virtual community, to a large extent, is congenial to Dewey's conception of community. After all, commonality and communication can be viewed as the dual foundation of virtual community. However, questions regarding the generic parading(s) and normative validation of virtual community as a pedagogical enterprise still remain somewhat unexplored and unanswered. More specifically, it is not clear what type of public discussion we deem conducive to the establishment of virtual communities. Nor can we be certain about the requisite length of public discussion for forming and sustaining the community. Above all, "sufficient feeling" as a constitutive component of virtual communities is so vague that we could question the existence of almost all virtual communities. Clearly, virtual community is such an illusive concept that we can hardly reach a universal agreement on its definition. As a result, it is difficult to determine how virtual community should shape the formation of human disposition and how school should prepare students for their participation in the continuous development of virtual community.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[9] In light of Anderson's insight, I will explore how the style of virtual communities is imagined and how the style shapes the pedagogical process within and beyond virtual communities.

The Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Virtual Communities.

The establishment of various virtual communities relies upon the Internet and computer-mediated communication system (CMCS) that free us from both spatial and temporal constrains to engage in communication and to form communities. To a large extent, the formation of most virtual communities is not independent from off-line communities. In fact, some virtual communities overlap with off-line physical or "real-life" communities. However, as virtual communities have no territorial physical, the ephemeral existence of virtual communities appears to be based on the members' "consensual hallucination."[10] Furthermore, scientists such as Hans Moravec have started to envision the transformation of human consciousness into an computerized information pattern.[11] As discussed above, the making of virtual community implicitly suggests the on-going movement to replace or even displace materiality of human community by virtuality. E.Soja points out:

> *The spatio-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship (including class relations) are materially constituted, made constituted, made concrete. The constitution/ concretization process is problematic, filled with contradiction and struggle (amidst much that is recursive and routinized). Contradictions arise primarily form the duality of produced space as both outcome/ embodiment/product and medium/presupposition/product of social activity.*[12]

In the case of virtual communities, the contradictions embedded in the constitutive process often result from the tension between online and offline communities and the entanglement between disembodied and embodied communicative processes.

Undoubtedly, virtual communities could sustain their corresponding/overlapping offline communities. In fact, the Internet and computer-mediated communication systems (CMCS) have served as an internal communication system in many educational institutions, professional organizations, and even family systems. As mentioned before, advocates for virtual communities such as

Howard Rheingold suggests that the longitude of cyberdiscourse is the key factor for forming virtual community. Consequently, members' long-term commitment to virtual communities also compel them to curtail their face-to-face interaction with the other members within these corresponding off-line communities and beyond (e.g., family, coworkers, and neighbors). To a certain degree, the primacy of computer mediated communication indicates a depreciation of face-to-face communication within the local or institutional community. At the same time, it is not surprising that many groups of people have been devoted to the establishment of virtual communities that are independent and separate from "real-life" communities.

Evidently, the establishment of virtual communities demands a time commitment. J. Rifkin states that "the computer is a form of communication like script, print, and the telephone, but it is also a time tool, like the clock on the wall ...as a timepiece, the computer...establishes a new set of accelerated temporal demands on human behavior."[13] Furthermore, while Internet communication facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous communication, it is obvious that "efficiency" and "immediacy" are the benchmarks of computer-mediated-communication. Steven G. Jones points out that the Internet, like other electronic media, has led to the fragmentation of time. Specifically, he states that "Instead of time as a continuity, as a movement with regularity that grows from and in turn builds up our sense of interaction, times is experienced as atomistic and discontinuous; time is not spent with others, it is spent on or for others, or even for ourselves."[14]

Above all, cyberdiscourse based on the interconnection between human and machine simultaneously extends and confines our communicative capabilities. More specifically, communication in virtual communities has reduced the totality of our "beings" to immediate and animated images, voices, and text. Texts, signs, and electronic images are the primary communication medium in the virtual communities. The coding and decoding of the texts/ signs/ images inevitably filter out what would be nuances of face-to-face communication in a setting where communicators share the living space. Consequently, it is conducive for on-liners to disembody and objectify the other members of virtual communities and to perceive the communities as "belonging" to them.[15] In Jean Baudrillard's words, "every individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty."[16] Such "perfect sovereignty" clearly undermines the reciprocal nature of human communication.

As discussed above, the spatial and temporal dimensions of virtual communities have extensive impacts on teaching and learning. Above all, it should be noted that the development of information processing systems correspond with

the rise of the professional-managerial class; and both information technology and the professional-managerial class appear to contribute to the reproduction of current class system.[17] Basil Bernstein's study of how pedagogical practices sustain a class system is insightful for our exploration of the pedagogical nature and process of virtual community. Berstein argues that "[C]lass relations constitute inequalities in the distribution of power between social groups, which are realized in the creation, organization, distribution, legitimation, and reproduction of material and symbolic values arising out of the social division of labor."[18] He further makes a distinction between visible pedagogy (VP) and invisible pedagogy (IP). According to Berstein, visible pedagogies are realized through strong classification and frame, while invisible pedagogies are realized through weak classification and frame. Specifically, classification refers to "the degree of boundary maintenance between contents," and frame refers to: the degree of control teacher and pupil posses over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and receive in the pedagogical relationship."[19]

On the other hand, visible pedagogy requires strong classification of space. Seating arrangements, school facilities, and instructional apparatus all have their specific, designated functions. On the other hand, in the case of invisible pedagogies, "spaces and their contents are weakly classified.... This means that the potential space available to the child is very much greater. The privacy embodied in space regulated by visible pedagogies is considerably reduced."[20] Even-extended space and a fragmented temporal dimension, as the distinguishing characteristics of virtual community, embody the invisible pedagogies that foster what Durkfheim termed "organic solidarity" in modern society. The promotion of universal access to the Internet indicates the strong possibility of transforming the traditional classroom into a virtual classroom, which could be a microcosm of a virtual community. A virtual classroom supported by a computer-mediated communication system (CMCS) certainly could create ever expansive space for learning and teaching.[21] In the meantime, CMCSs enable teachers to document and monitor students' on-going learning processes. Consequently, students could subject themselves to continual surveillance.

Moreover, the flexibility of asynchronous communication mirrors "self-pacing" as the trademark of virtual classroom and renders sequencing and pacing rules more implicit.[22] Nevertheless, asynchronicity of virtual communication still demands immediate responses in modern industrial societies. This is why computer industries constantly push for the acceleration of speed, and students as well as teachers are inclined to expect immediate feedback in virtual classroom.

As mentioned before, the Internet and (CMCSs) are simply piggy-back

media. Virtual communities and virtual classrooms do not create their own physical space. However, a physical space is indispensable for any of us to launch into a virtual community / classroom. Bernstein points out that new middle class[23] parents expect their children to complete homework which often is based on textbooks. However, "the textbook requires a context, an official pedagogic context in the home. That is, a space-a silent space-and this is not usually available for in the homes of the poor."[24] Likewise, while children from low-income families could gain access to the Internet in school, there is no guarantee that they will have "a silent space" (including facilities) to enhance their skills even through the public would be willing to supply them with laptops.

Bernstein's conception of invisible pedagogies sheds light on the reproduction of the new middle class in a modern industrial society. **As virtual classrooms embody invisible pedagogies and invisible pedagogies reflect the new middle professional-managerial class value, we certainly need to be cautions about how virtual classrooms could sustain the current structure and contribute to further class stratification.

The Social Dimension of Virtual Communities

As discussed before, John Dewey argues that community facilities individual development. G. Simmel also points out that the actualization of individuality is based on the individual's contribution to the collectivity.[25] In other words, social interactions are essential to the formation of both individuality and collectivity. Various net communities certainly reflect diversified social interactions in human communities. However, social interactions in virtual communities depend upon computer-mediated communication. Steve G. Jones points out that:

> *CMC... not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individual use to enter that space. It is more than the context within which social relations occur (although it is that, too) for it is commented on and imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups.*[26]

Like the establishment of many modern nations, the construction of vir-

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** Due to limitation of space, this paper does not examine the empirical evidences which support or dispute Bernstein's theory. However, I do not therefore suggest that Bernstein's theory has universal applicability. Here, I only intend to show how Bernstein's theory is helpful for us to inquire into the culture and pedagogical construct of virtual community.

tual communities have been imagined through shared cultural practices.[27] Inhabitants in and visitors to various virtual communities, to a large extent, share common concerns and interests even though they disperse in different time and space. While their sharing common interests and concerns could reinforce community solidarity, it is essential not undermine the significance of "the accidents of proximity" which forms traditional community.[28] In other words, the accidents of proximity may not allow free association. However, involuntary association often reveals heterogeneity in the given community. Bellah et. al. Point out that the association of today's professional middle class often is based on their shared life style. To them, "[W]hereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different calling of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity."[29] Following their argument, David Healy refers to virtual communities as life-style enclaves.[30]

Moreover, while inhabitants and visitors can be connected and form conviviality in virtual communities, it should be noted that they can be easily disconnected as soon as they are not communicating. In other words, the vicissitude of virtual communities makes it difficult to sustain the collectivity that presumably could nurture individual development. In addition, computer-mediated communication has enhances the fluidity of our identity. It is simple and easy for us to disguise our identity while participating in cyberdiscourse. To a certain degree, Foucault is correct when he asserts that anonymity could free the individual subject from the social-political and social-cultural bonds which attempt to fix his or her identity.[31] Disguised identity may facilitate genuine self-disclosure. At the same time, deceptive identity could contribute to a mis-representation of voices which certainly can misguide the development of collectivity.

On the other words, while net communities are virtually interconnected, cyberdiscourse cannot be exempted from parochialism. Collusion need not be inherent with any net communities, and dialogue between different net groups is not uncommon; however, cyberdiscourse often is more inviting to like-minded cyborgs who share the same or similar concerns, interests, and values. Consequently, various disconnected net communities have chartered cyberspace. Although destructive collision between divergent net groups has been avoided, fortress-like virtual communities have averted confrontation yet fruitful dialogue between them.

Furthermore, Internet as a medium of public discourse has not mediated existing imbalanced power relationship between various groups. Technically, universal accessibility tot he Internet can be an attainable goal, and user friendly technology can easily transform us into cyborgs trotting on the information

super-high way. However, the diffusive power of modern technology does not guarantee equivalence of relationship. An inclusive cyberdiscourse could not disclaim and silence non-cyborg' resistance toward cybernetic interconnections. Nor should cyborgs attempt to speak for non-cyborgs. Without non-cyborgs' direct participation, cyberdiscourse is somewhat limited and exclusive. Virtual communities can offer public space for political soap box and street marching; however, it is unlikely that virtual social and political movements can generate than transpose.

Conclusion

To a large extent, the Internet and computer-mediated communication disable to set boundaries "between the real and virtual, between time zones and between spaces, ...between our sense of self and our sense of our changing roles."[32] Virtual communities, like traditional communities, could provide us with "context within which personal identity is formed, a place where fluent self-awareness follow the current of communal conversation and contributes to them.[33] Upon examining the temporal, spatial, and social dimensions of virtual communities, I caution that virtual community as a pedagogical enterprise may not contribute to the equal share of culture power. Nor could it foster a long-lasting recognition of culture diversity in the human community. As virtual community certainly will not disappear from the upcoming millennium, it is important for educators and their students to undertake a more critical inquiry into pedagogical nature and process of virtual communities.

Notes

1. Steven G.Jones, "The Internet and Its Social Landscape," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steven G.Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage, 1997),pages 7-35;Linda M. Harasim,ed., *Global Networks: Computer and International Communication* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993).
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Autonomedia, 1998); Louise Wilson, "Cyberwar, God, and Television: Interview with Paul Virillio, CHEORY (electronic edition), Article 20, December 1994; cited in Derck Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997),pages 6-22.
3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).
4. Ibid.

5.John Deway, "My Pedagogical Creed" in *School Journal*, Vol. Liv (1987), page 154.
6.John Deway, "My Pedagogical Creed" in *School Journal*, Vol. Liv (1987), page 78.
7.Ibid.
8.Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).
9.Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Original and Spread of Nationalism, revised ed.* (London: Verso, 1983/1991).
10.William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Bantam, 1984), page 7.
11.Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); cited in N.K. Hayles, "Boundary Disputes: Homeostasis, Reflexivity, and the Foundations of Cybernetics" in *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents*, ed. Robert Markley (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
12.Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion on space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), page 129.
13.J. Rifkin, 'Time Wars' (New York: Thouchstone Books, 1987) cited in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).
14.Inid. p. 15.
15.M. L. Mclaughlin, K. K. Osborne, C. B. Smith, " Standard of Conduct on Usenet," in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. S. G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995), pages 90-111.
16.Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Autonomedia, 1988).
17.Andrew Ross, "The New Smartness," in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology, Dia Center for the Arts Discussion in Contemporary Culture*, no.90, eds. Gretchen Bender and T. Druckrey (Seattle, WA: The Bay Press, 1994).
18.B. Berstein, *Class, Codes, and Control: Volume III* (New York Routledge, 1977), page viii.
19.Basil Bernstein "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge," in B. Berstein, *Class, Codes, and Control*: Vol.2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), page 205; B. Bernstein, *Class, Codes, and Control*: Vol.1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), page 88.
20.Basil Bernstein, "Class and Pedagogies: Visible and Invisible," in *Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*, eds. A.H. Hasley, Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, and Amy Stuart Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) .
21.Starr Roxanne Hiltz, *The Virtual Classroom: Learning without Limits via Computer Networks* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1994)

22. Bernstein's discussion on the concept of time focuses on child development. Here, I center on the asychronous communication as the distinguished character of virtual community.
23. To Bernstein, the new middle class refers to the following agencies/agent of symbolic control: (1). Regulations: Members of the legal system, police, prison service, church; (2)Repairers: Members of the medical/psychiatric and their derivatives, social services; (3)Diffusers: Teachers at all levels and in all areas including mass and specialized media; (4)Shapers: Creators of what counts as developments within or change of symbolic forms; (5) Executors: Civil services-bureaucrats.
24. Basil Bernstein, *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse Volume IV Class, Codes and Control* (New York: Routledge, 1990), page 77.
25. G. Simmel, *The Sociology of G. Simmel*, translated by k. Wolff (New York: Free Press,1950).
26. Steve G. Jones, "Understanding Community in Information Age," in *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community*, ed. S. G. Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995) page 16.
27. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Edition) (London: Verso, 1986/1991).
28. Dave Hearly, "Cyberspace and Place: The Internet as Middle Landscape on the Electronic Frontier" in *Internet Culture* ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997).
29. R. Bellah, R. Madsen, W.M.Sullivan, Swidler, W. M. & S.M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1995), page 66.
30. Dave Hearly, "Cyberspace and Place: The Internet as Middle Landscape on the Electronic Frontier" in *Internet Culture* ed. David Proter (New York: Routledge, 1997).
31. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault effect: Study in Govermentality: With Two Lectures by and An Interview with Michel Foucault*, eds. Graham Bercell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
32. Robert Shields, "Virtual Spaces, Real Histories and Living Bodies," in *Culture of Internet* ed. R. Shields (London: Sage, 1996), page 1-10.
33. R. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, Swidler, W. M. & S. M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1995), page 135.

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