Login and logout: practices of resistance and presence in virtual environments as a kind of reflective learning activity

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Online publication date: 13 April 2011

To cite this Article Marchi, Simona and Ciceri, Emma(2011) 'Login and logout: practices of resistance and presence in virtual environments as a kind of reflective learning activity', Reflective Practice, 12: 2, 209 — 223

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/14623943.2011.561533

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2011.561533

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Login and logout: practices of resistance and presence in virtual environments as a kind of reflective learning activity

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(Received 1 December 2010; final version received 7 February 2011)

Learning processes are closely connected to the contexts in which professional and day-to-day practices are conducted, and to the characteristics of those contexts. These processes develop through and between different systems of activities, established by actors operating on the basis of explicit and implicit rules in order to achieve certain goals. They do so through the use of artefacts and knowledge, within a system of labour sharing, role definition and specific power mechanisms.

What happens when the rules of these systems, or the roles, artefacts or knowledge, change? What happens to learning processes if the contexts in which the practices are implemented happen to be online, for example in a blog or a virtual community of practice (VCoP) or on social networking platforms? When we speak of learning in Web 2.0 environments created \textit{ex novo} within a project, we are speaking of a type of participation and precise presence that does not manifest itself through a nomadic, solitary journey around the web. It is, rather, considered as one of the ways of being, learning and working together within a given project. This is, therefore, a very powerful option: learning together online through the use of ICT and in a given space of time.

Our intention in this paper is to develop a two-fold reflection on learning modes in virtual activity systems: the importance of learning as participating (learning to participate); the importance of learning to learn together in virtual environments (learning together). In so doing, we refer to the experience of using web instruments in the context of a European project in which guidance practitioners from a number of different countries took part. Lastly, the general lines of a participatory and appreciative approach to facilitating online reflective learning will be proposed.

\textbf{Keywords:} virtual environment; VCoP; learning to participate; learning together; social networking; appreciative reflection

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Introduction

The learning processes that take place through web environments developed *ex novo* and for a set, albeit on average long, period of time (e.g., one year), involve learning:

1. together with others who sometimes know one another, at other times do not;
2. synchronously or asynchronously;
3. the mechanisms of presence/absence and online participation; and
4. with and through the use of technology.

The aspects that need to be taken into consideration before embarking on a reflection on learning methods in relation to virtual activity systems are essentially two:

- Learning together: learning the methods of interaction and exchange through the relationship between technology and participants. How does technology activate individual and collective modes of online interaction and, vice versa, how does the way in which we use web resources transform our sense of the technology involved? How does learning develop through these interactions?
- Learning to participate: learning the sense and methods of online participation. What are the mechanisms of online participation: the drivers, resistance, duration, continuity (or lack of it) of online presence, the relationship between on- and offline? What does online participation mean?

This paper will seek to respond to the questions asked above and propose a way to facilitate online participatory and appreciative reflective learning.
Learning together through virtual environments

The first aspect, ‘learning together’, creates a relationship between practitioner community and virtual environment. According to Wenger, White, and Smith (2009), a community of practice that acts in virtual activity systems can be defined as a community of practice if learning is its central characteristic and fundamental goal. The distinguishing feature of such communities is, therefore, a sharing of the practices of presence, writing, publication and online production for the purpose of personal and professional improvement for individuals and communities, through specific learning processes. We are speaking, therefore, about online practices whose main objective is learning through participation and the sharing of ideas, experiences and emotions, and not the production of a given output envisaged by an organisation.

It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between team and community of practice. Taking the definition of community of practice chosen here, the team cannot be considered as such a community since the central element linking the members of a team is not learning in itself, but reaching a given organisational goal and/or solving a given problem through rules, timescales and roles established in a given organisation. This does not mean that there is no learning involved in this process, but learning is not its main aspect.

In communities of practice, learning becomes the central element. Participants become learning partners and depart temporarily from the formal roles established by their organisations. In this respect, ‘learning together depends on the quality of relationships, of trust and mutual engagement that members develop with each other’ (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009, p. 8). This distinction is important because it enables us to focus on learning as the goal of online practices and helps us understand why many virtual communities of practice (VCoP) initially established as online extensions of work teams operating in given organisations have not achieved the desired results.

By virtual environments we mean here online contexts co-generated through the joint use of different platforms and applications, and characterised by learning together. These environments may be placed on an institutional footing with clearly defined boundaries, like VCoPs (virtual communities of practice), or they may be distributed over networks and take shape through the joint use of a number of different resources. In the experience we acquired during the European project we sought to link the two types and tried to establish an environment that could take on the features of a VCoP but at the same time retain a vision of technology understood as social practice (Suchman, Blomberg, Orr, & Trigg, 1999). This is based on the co-definition and simultaneous co-design of the virtual environments and of the community of practice that was being established. The idea guiding us was that the development of a system ‘is not the creation of discrete, intrinsically meaningful objects, but the cultural production of new forms of material practice’ (Suchman et al., 1999, p. 394).

On the basis of a review of the literature on VCoPs and a study of at least 18 VCoPs, Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2003) have constructed a typology that considers 21 structural characteristics organised into four main dimensions: demographic, organisational context, membership features and technological environment. Within each dimension, each of the 21 characteristics may vary along a continuum defined by two poles. This means that as these 21 structural characteristics vary we will in turn obtain a variety of VCoPs. This study shows that what holds an online CoP (community of practice) together is not so much the choice of technological
instruments, i.e. the way in which the virtual environment (VE) in itself is structured, but the new idea of social relations that the interaction between the CoP and the VE manages to co-generate and support.

Considering the relationship between technology, community and learning therefore means placing the emphasis on the term ‘practice’. This is a strong epistemological option that many authors have already addressed in the field of practice-based study. Most notably, in her article From community of practices to practices of a community: Brief history of a travelling concept, Gherardi (2008) underscores that forms of on- and offline collaboration have put the very idea of CoP (community of practice) to the test. She suggests that a transition be made from the concept of community of practices to that of practices of a community (PoC), where reflection remains connected to practice and so to forms of coordination and interaction.

The characteristics of practices and their sociological interest lies not so much in their variability but in their repetition, in their recursivity (Gherardi & Bruni, 2007), in their function of social reproduction and the construction of identity. In this recursivity, artistic talent, creativity and the capacity and intent to innovate, change and invent are developed. In studying online learning practices, we need to develop the variability and creativity associated with practices that manifest themselves as elementary and repetitive, i.e. technically directed to reproducing the place/context. Web 2.0 environments, in truth, change constantly in their content, the outcome of their expressive forms and their effect on participants, even though they are built and maintained through practices ‘reproducing’ the resources themselves.

### Learning to participate in virtual environments

The second aspect, ‘learning to participate’, focuses on learning as participation and, at the same time, on participation as the outcome of a learning process. Sfard (1998) suggests two metaphors for learning: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor.

The first metaphor for learning refers primarily to an accumulation (having) of information (knowledge), the aim of which is individual enrichment through the acquisition and possession of concepts and processes. Knowledge is understood as something that exists independently of actors. It can be acquired, possessed and organised by concept, material, content, notions, models and facts.

The second, the participation metaphor, sees learning as a goal linked to doing together that begins with an individual’s learning to become an active participant, an activity that enables the group to be set up and produce knowledge (knowing) and learning through a process of reflection on individual and collective experience.

The metaphor for learning as a participation process is particularly well suited to virtual environments configured through social software applications that have been developed to support interaction within a group (Shirky, 2003) in which both learning and the production of knowledge are situated within relationships and distributed networks. At the same time, the metaphor for learning as an acquisition process is useful because it highlights another form of learning – and so of participation in communities – that is based on a different system of expectations. Participants in this learning process may be motivated by one or the other approach, or by both.

The decision to engage in social interaction, dialogue and exchange in virtual environments, especially by those who are driven by the logic of participation, depends on the existence of certain key elements. These include, first and foremost:
(1) considering interaction and the sharing of experience as a value;
(2) knowing and respecting the ethical implications of online interaction; and
(3) developing a reflective learning process based on valorising the individual and collective experiences of the group of participants.

For those attracted to the logic of acquisition, ‘frequenting’ virtual environments depends on:

(1) well-organised documents and content;
(2) ease of access and use; and
(3) constant up-dating of archives and the way they are structured.

A necessary condition for participation/fruition is, in any case, the creation of an environment (Schön, 1983). This step could seem forced with respect to the freedom offered by Web 2.0 as regards opportunities, including random ones, for sharing, creating and learning. However, an individual’s choice to engage personally and learn by developing connections and ways of collaborating and by producing and sharing knowledge online means that modes of interaction and exchange that have certain characteristics must be defined.

The participatory dimension of online learning together (Jacobs, 2006) means not just individual participation but also creating the conditions for greater inclusion of different ways of knowing, understanding and seeing our own and other people's experiences. This means considering differences as a useful learning resource, but also recognising the value and validity of different voices through a shared process of participatory and deliberative democracy amongst equals (Phillips, 1995).

To be secure, virtual environments do not necessarily have to be private, closed and protected from outside eyes. It is the quality of the interaction and relationships created there that makes an environment secure. An environment perceived by participants as secure is in general characterised by interactions that are intended to appreciate, value and systematise, often creatively, the positive aspects and strong points of individual and collective contributions. In other words, an environment that produces value and/or objects of value, understood as:

terms, gestures, behaviours, objects, that give the impression that what happens or circulates does indeed have a density, objectivity or a solidity that compels the modification of attitudes, the undoing of presuppositions and changes of opinions, or the reversal of precedent. (Latour, 2007, p. 227)

The value produced within an environment conceived for online learning does not lie solely in the production of knowledge but also in its distribution, sharing and co-generation. Reciprocity, a key aspect of online interaction practices, is expressed in terms of objects, emotions and content that are shared and exchanged on the basis of recognising the other within a relationship of trust based on listening, receptiveness, and valorising individual contributions.

The different types of valorisation are a function of participation, individual and group objectives, and the forms taken by interaction practices and by individual expectations and reputational dynamics, and vice versa. All these elements are in turn influenced by the valorisation modes that are generated and eventually become established within the group. Processes of constructing positive online reputational aspects are underpinned by appreciative ways of valorising the contributions offered...
by different participants. These refer to the group’s ability to grasp and valorise the positive potential of individual or group experiences.

**Login and log-out. Resistance, presence, participation and learning in virtual environments**

*The importance of the two levels; fruition and communication*

I found the VCoP very interesting for document consultation. I opened the things I found there, in effect it seemed very useful because it allows you to share files and material. As a communication system I personally have some difficulties, I mean I don’t like using these tools. I normally use the network email service – very trite, I realise.

It’s only for the immediacy factor, rather than entering a site or a forum, something that means, on a day-to-day basis, when you’ve got a lot to do, a step that is pretty trivial in itself, but which doesn’t come easily to me…to be frank….. And then I find that the communicative aspect always needs to be connected to a human, face-to-face process. It needs to be linked to a job that you do in person, with a considerable degree of continuity and intensity, otherwise the remote communication channel, by itself, risks being a space that in my opinion tends to wither away. For me it’s more convenient, therefore, to consider the levels: use of the material, sharing of the ‘to-do-list’, internal communication system, communication with the outside world: who we are and what we’re doing.

(COL practitioner)

The viewpoints of the users taking part in virtual communities can be considered at a double level (see Figure 1):

1. the level of choice (external or internal driver); and
2. the motivation level (personal level of involvement, the motivational dynamics leading to the participant deciding to be there, to listen, give, receive, as well as the meaning that the act of presence assumes for those performing it).

These are substantive levels. As Turkle (1995) asserts, the apparent intrinsic structural weakness of virtual communities, contrasted with the strong structure of real societies, in actual fact makes it possible to establish community-based constraints on the basis not of power relationships but of free choices based on an affinity of interests. From this perspective, such weaknesses are transformed into a positive value.

We can imagine four macro-areas of reference that are generated by the intersection of the two levels. These help us to identify the main types of participation by seeking to answer two fundamental questions. The first: What leads individuals to take part in virtual communities? And the second: How can we organise these communities in such a way as to facilitate and strengthen active and virtuous participation?

We should first consider the choice axis. In this case, there may be a response to a request or to an external stimulus, of an institutional nature (with a limited involvement by the user, which leads to a possible temporary relationship). Examples might be the participation of a group of managers selected from the company’s senior management to find a solution to specific market needs, or a team representing the different realities taking part in a project. Or there may be an informed personal choice (with a strong motivation and high degree of commitment, guarantees of a lasting relationship) based on the ethics of the relationship. Here, an example might be a group of volunteers organising network support activities for people in difficulty.
This axis intersects with the motivation axis. Here the response may be rational and economical, based on a cost-benefit analysis of the individual’s participation in a project, activity or group. Or it may be emotional and based on attention to others, to people, colleagues and relationships, and inspired by the concept of the gift.

Each choice and each approach entails a different ‘being there’ in virtual relationships, as well as different expectations.

To date, many virtual communities are considered at the theoretical level as static and vertical structures (e.g., bottom-up: access, motivation, online socialisation, information giving and receiving, knowledge construction, development). These take into account roles and elements that can intersect perfectly (e.g., technology, learning, moderating). This type of schematisation (Berge & Collins, 1996) does not, perhaps, respond in full to the ‘emotional’ and motivational dynamics that are typical of online experience.

Web 2.0 social networks are polymorphous and in constant flux. Micro-groups and communities therefore manage and develop processes that can often be unexpected, on different levels that do not always coincide with pre-structured models.

**The importance of the group and of synchronous interactions**

I was reflecting on this because I’ve not visited the site yet. I’ve had some experience of other, similar sites and suchlike and it’s always been the case that, after the first five days, we don’t know what to say to each other. Because the thing I find interesting, in effect, is the group dimension, and if we can’t all be there together at the same time in a virtual environment, that’s what makes the difference, as I see it. We either need to arrange a
date and time, or else it becomes something much more operational. But that’s not the interesting part, in my opinion. The interesting part is the reflection you can engage in together when you stop and say: ‘Let’s all think about this question together’. Otherwise, there’s a time-lapse between when I write and when somebody replies, and that creates a distance and a slip in the relationship. In the meantime, I’ll have been thinking other things, while the person replying to me is still referring to what I wrote a while ago, and I might even have written another piece in the intervening period. (COL practitioner)

**The desirability of learning to develop relationships and communication remotely**

It seems to me that the way we feel is very common. I interpret this in two ways. On the one hand, the predisposition of age, as we are, in reality, somewhat grown up. On the other hand, our work involves a lot of contact with people, so it’s our job to have direct relationships with service users. That’s definitely true. But it’s also true that this is maybe an occasion that in some way forces us into a privileged situation: we’re not speaking about a forum of strangers but of a situation where we know each other, so for us it would be an opportunity for discussion and debate. Just as we tell our 50-year-old users that not knowing how to use a computer is simply out of the question, I’m afraid that we need to say the exact same thing to each other: the further on we go, the more of these virtual meeting opportunities there will be. (COL practitioner)

In a virtual community, working contexts should follow an approach based on transparency and consistency. Complex communities are often not located in a single virtual ‘place’, but are spread over several locations, each of which will have its own precise functions, typicality (and technical specifications), limits and potential. It is important, therefore, to ensure that each location clearly has and is clearly characterised by these features, so that users know what to expect when they enter.

Spaces and environments should not be considered as unique or unequivocal: the example of the Reflect-OR VCoP experience demonstrated that every so often a multiplication of spaces over time, to the disadvantage, perhaps, of the amount of content, makes it possible to set dynamics in motion that would otherwise be inhibited.

A ‘network presence’ in so many locations on the web (email, Facebook pages, dedicated social networks, project intranets, LinkedIn and others) should be analysed as a whole so that the dynamics set in motion between the members of the group can in turn be better analysed, and from a wider perspective: a perspective that takes into account not just the initial goals (or which does not stop at simple reporting of successes or failures in achieving objectives) but also the road embarked upon by individuals and the micro- and macro-groups that often do not follow a single, clear-cut path and which often contain an element of the unexpected.

This makes it necessary to continuously follow the evolution of this path and to highlight the positive and fruitful elements on a case-by-case basis. It is also necessary, of course, to seek to understand the reasons for any absences, problems or intricacies and to find, together with the group, the best solutions to prevent any gaps or critical situations arising.

The experience of the Reflect-OR VCoP project is an obvious example of how important it is to transform, when necessary, the locations and ways of meeting online.

This community of practice, linked to the European project of the same name, was created with the primary intention of connecting, on a number of levels, participants in the different countries involved (Italy, UK, Bulgaria and Switzerland). It was therefore, and necessarily, conceived as a simple and fairly traditional place: an intranet that enables dialogue with the www.ref-or.eu website and exchange of files of all
types (images, text, audio-visuals, etc.). Also envisaged was the possibility of making relevant files visible in the public area of the site too.

Over the first two months we very soon realised that it was not sufficient to meet the needs of the project team. Indeed, the team was looking for other ways (in addition to face-to-face meetings and emails) to involve task force members and, above all, to engage in dialogue with participants in the different European countries involved. The first change en route was, therefore, the addition of an internal instant messaging area. This was followed by a limited-access forum that was fairly successful, albeit for a relatively short period. The next step, with the project already under way, was to create a dedicated social network. In this case, arrangements for participation were less controlled and guided, and as a result more free and less closely tied to the project context. At the same time, however, the communication made possible by the forum helped to consolidate interpersonal relations in a different way, through a more emotional and direct approach and on issues that were broader in scope.

Taken together, these places and types of interaction make up a very complex and dynamic universe, with dark corners and bright spots, linked both to the time factor and to the chain – whether or not one is actually achieved – of feedback from other users. It was extremely interesting to note, in the periods immediately following face-to-face meetings, that there was a peak in access and a greater amount of input to the various virtual locations. On the social network, more numerous in the case of internal meetings between project team and individual task forces, and in the institutional area, more numerous when the meetings involved the teams at the international level.

**Overcoming performance anxiety and starting from the shared experience**

The VCoP is the virtual space of a group that has shared an experience: an experience that started in the Reflect project and concerned the reflective approach and our profession, but which then expanded to other contexts, because it spread to other contexts. So there isn’t, or shouldn’t be, any performance anxiety: ‘Oh my God, what should I say? Does it make sense? Is it OK or not?’ If we think of a particular piece of content as being linked to the VCoP or to this group, that means that we thought it might be something that should be shared with the others, with this group…. (COL practitioner)

**Let the fact of thinking of a group of project partners select the content**

I thought that the fact of thinking about this group in some way selects the type of subjects dealt with. It wouldn’t occur to me to talk to them about a volleyball game, a subject that has never even come up in our reflections. So maybe the distinguishing factor is in itself inherent to the type of group we are. And nothing prevents anyone from saying ‘I’ll give you a song’, but at that point the thing you’re touching, experiencing, isn’t the content but the feelings you’ve been receptive to. (COL practitioner)

**Participation, the difficulty of recognising yourself in what you write and the freedom to leave a reflection**

Normally, when I write something and then read it back I find it really hard to recognise myself in what I’ve written. So I thought of this as a gift: I write something and leave that reflection there for the group. If I have to think of using the VCoP, then I can think of using it to leave a reflection. If I give you a gift, it’s because it gives me pleasure to
do so. If I start thinking along the lines of ‘I gave you a little present yesterday, what are you going to give me today?’ then there’s a very high risk that I’ll feel constrained or that there’ll be a lack of giving-and-taking of gifts. (COL practitioner)

Pathways of choice (choosing whether and how to be present) are key elements both to understand expectations and to suggest medium-term goals, even once the project has ended. Participants in turn established little transverse groups and stayed in touch using different tools and in different locations on the web, for example Facebook. The network in reality is not just a virtual mirror of real places, but a place-means, which you can cross, live in, own, explore or govern. An apt metaphor is parkour, an urban activity (or discipline) defined in France as *art du déplacement*, the art of displacement. Participants have to overcome any type of obstacle on their route by adapting their bodies to the surrounding environment.

So sharing and ‘taking ownership of’ spaces is both the goal and the means of being present on the web. A primary task of facilitators (who may be ‘parkour instructors’, or teach participants how to give their best possible performances within a space without ‘getting hurt’) is to ‘prepare and prepare themselves for change’, while preserving the clarity of intent and transparency of the relationships within the group and between participants.

*Reciprocity as a way of valorising other people’s contributions and stabilising affective-emotional dynamics*

One thing comes to mind: it’s true that if I give someone a gift, I don’t need to address the problem of getting something in exchange. It’s also true, however, that we’re maybe not all that aware of the emotional impact of the significance of these exchanges to the relationship, even if they’re made in a virtual space.

It’s true that if I start an internal process in which I invest at the emotional level and don’t get any in return from it, then I view that as a negative experience. I put myself in the shoes of somebody who has offered some content of value that has some form of relational value and doesn’t get anything back…. It’s true that we shouldn’t expect something in return at all costs, but what comes back to me at an emotional level is a sense…everyone can have their say…. Maybe it would be useful to reflect and be aware: recognise the value of what the others are contributing and valuing it.

If someone is brave enough to break through a wall of silence that is physical and has emotional depth, maybe there should also be an awareness on our part. We should recognise that and make an effort in that direction. We should give it value, which can also take the form of saying: ‘I don’t know what to say to you but I’m thinking of you’. Send a message, anyway, that you’re there for that person. (COL practitioner)

*Accountability, support and respect for people giving something of themselves in the network*

In the day-to-day dynamics of our work, with the huge amounts of emails we get all the time and that we often don’t read, or just skim through, there’s a risk that the episodic fragmentation of the relationship could generate a feeling that we’re not accountable. So there’s a lack of cohesion and of recognition, and of a sense of responsibility towards others. It’s like in a Mastandrea film, where the singer throws himself off the stage and
the audience opens up and he crashes to the ground. At the end of the day it’s an act of faith, letting yourself go completely, letting something of yourself go. It’s something that’s played out over several levels, even a request for help or for someone to listen.
(COL practitioner)

**Online practices as reflective learning activities**

On the basis of what we have said so far, we can state that online learning practices are also reflective learning practices if they:

- are conceived as a set of specifically situated social practices that are conducted in relation to individual and collective objectives that from one situation to the next are redefined and hinge upon learning processes;
- foster reflection on participants’ own experiences and those of the other participants, as well as synchronous and asynchronous reflection during the online practice itself with respect to participants’ own way of inhabiting a virtual environment and helping to generate value and learning;
- are based on forces of inclusion and, at the same time, of distinction/valorisation amongst participating practitioners. These are in part institutional in nature, defined in relation to the characteristics of the virtual environment and the roles identified in it; and in part negotiated through interactions and a redefinition of the modes of presence/participation;
- enable the emergence and activation of a virtual reality produced socially, and therefore in conditions of flux, in which participants are immersed and in which they participate by co-determining that reality;
- make it possible to establish a relationship that is both epistemic and pragmatic with day-to-day practices internal and/or external to the community;
- activate and stabilise participatory democratic processes;
- enable individuals and groups to express and reorganise their knowledge, opinions and purposes in an appreciative manner; and
- have a retroactive effect on the practices themselves and on the modes of participation.

The difficulties are many:

- Exclusion mechanisms can be very powerful and may act in a non-uniform manner.
- Virtual environments are subject to constant reformulations that always involve temporary stabilisation stages.
- The rapid obsolescence of knowledge and experiences in the network makes it difficult to identify ways of valorising participation and the contribution brought by each participant.
- The often asynchronous modes of connection mean that it is crucial to choose the content to be shared and the way to share it, given the different ways in which participants use that content.
- The reputational aspects are of great importance and regulate participants’ choices in terms of practices, identity and connection styles. These aspects are variable and can generate tensions, all the more so when relationships include heterogeneous actors and purposes.
Misalignments or ‘anti-programmes’ are always present in each online learning practice and may undermine relationships or encourage a frequent reformulation of common goals and values.

- The marked variability in practices in the use of Web 2.0 resources, since decisions, practices and knowledge affect multiple fields of action.
- The tension between appreciative modes designed to value individual contributions and silence/absence is the narrow line on which new forms of online power are played out. These can increase the rhythm of practices in virtual environments at a dizzying rate or else discourage participation.
- Participants’ expectations as to modes of participation and presence online of the other vary according to the type of content (affective-emotional, professional, institutional, friendship-based, cultural, etc.) and the urgency of the response.
- The overall effect of online practices may not satisfy the expectations of individual participants, who may decide to abandon the community.
- Some issues could occupy most of the spaces for discourse and this could diminish the sense of ‘citizenship’ felt by those who feel for some reason that they are excluded from these issues. This can undermine democratic participation. When this happens, any increased rigidity on the part of the coordinators/facilitators in defining rules for participation may cause some participants to leave.

Facilitating appreciative and reflective learning in virtual environments

Virtual environments can also be and are, in fact, environments in which learning simply ‘happens’ (Amin & Roberts, 2006). However, in this paper we are referring to online practices whose aim is to share knowledge, experiences and emotions in order to foster the development of learning processes by individuals and/or a group.

This may seem to force the issue with respect to the high level of serendipity associated with online journeys experienced at various times of the day by users spread across different countries. The qualities, however, that encourage participation in virtual environments, and self-selection by participants, are the clarity of the objectives and the way in which the interactions take place. Taken together, these elements – the central role of learning, clarity of objectives and modes of interaction – sometimes require the presence of one or more facilitators. Facilitation is conducted through different roles and forms of communication, depending on the online environment in which it is developed. This type of support, whether online or offline, is provided at both the intellectual and the emotional levels.

Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) identify a form of leadership emerging from the relationship between new technologies and communities, which they call ‘technology stewardship’. This has the task of helping communities to construct and live in digital habitats, operating both at the level of technological choices and through support for their use within the practices of a community. This is a form of valorisation both of what happens spontaneously in the community and of what happens on the basis of a given plan and/or schedule. This is often a competence distributed throughout the community rather than focused in any one individual.

If we consider both the specific characteristics of a facilitator and the new form of leadership mentioned above, it is possible to configure a new form of online facilitation defined as appreciative stewardship. This flanks the concept of technology stewardship with that of leader as steward (Senge, 1998); that is, a leader who is able to
facilitate the construction of a collective vision, starting by valorising different viewpoints and listening to individual stories.

The concept of appreciative stewardship is not new. It came into being as a term concerning servitude and was linked to the responsibility and ability to ‘take care of’ everything that a house and the lives within it encompass. Various spheres have been used and in some way transformed the concept of steward.

Undoubtedly, the religious world is still today the one in which ‘stewardship’, and ‘appreciative stewardship’ in particular, is most widely used. We need only think of the custom of donations, the work of care, the responsibility for the development of a community, the ability to activate the donor community with respect to a shared vision of the development of the religious community. But it applies also and above all to the ability to say ‘thank you’, to recognise each other, and the significance of the other, and to make all participants (donors) feel that they are integral to the development of the community.

This concept is also used in the spheres of education and healthcare. In the former case it refers primarily to teaching and human resource organisation. In the latter, it refers mainly to treating the ill and the specificities of the relationship with the person being cared for. The central aspect is its origin, linked to: ‘taking care of’; the development of an organisation, of a community and its members; mutual responsibility in collective development; the recognition of the other as a subject who brings value (in various forms) and who contributes, since that subject is also responsible; as well as the development of a community.

It is above all with reference to this last stage that it is possible to consider the concept of ‘appreciative stewardship’, understood as a form of distributed, online leadership based on the positive valorisation of participants’ different perspectives and viewpoints and on a recognition of the value brought by each to the learning processes within the community. This concept is important, since it is based on a recognition and legitimisation of the presence of others in the learning relationship. It requires a grounding in technological skills but also the ability to support a narrative, dialogic architecture of online participation. It is, therefore, closely related to appreciative reflection and reflective learning processes (Ghaye et al., 2008).

Appreciative stewardship consists of the activity of fostering the development and improvement of individual visions expressed in various forms; for example narrative, of giving them a voice and a representation, and of bringing them together in order to co-construct a bigger, dynamic and collective vision.

The ‘leader steward’ is not the owner of the organisation in which he/she works, the financial and human resources he/she uses, or the visions he/she helps to construct. Similarly, the appreciative steward’s power of action is ‘limited’ to responsibility for representing, communicating and putting into action the various individual visions and organising them in a collective vision, but with some additional aspects/responsibilities:

(1) constructing the context and relationship conditions that enable all participants to take part and express themselves freely;
(2) encouraging the valorisation of the positive, achievable aspects of individual visions and attempting not to be led into dilemmas with no possible solutions, or into conflictual dynamics;
(3) fostering the co-construction of a collective awareness or wisdom and, therefore, passing from a vision focusing on the individual to one focusing on the group or community;
(4) organising a collective vision with respect to which the development of the group and of individuals is planned and sustainable; and
(5) encouraging a shared construction of meaning with respect to action and to acting in the direction decided upon.

The reflective learning considered here is based on an appreciative reflection. It refers to a type of reflective thought that aims to identify, valorise and transform/expand the scope of meaning that is most appropriate for a given group of participants and to emphasise the conditions in which it occurs. This is an intentional process, whose social context is of a fundamental importance and within which the experience of the individual participants and of the group is recognised and valued. It is a process within which participants are not just users but active participants whose objective is learning, transformation and improvement – individual, of the group and of the organisation.

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References


