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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"I don't think that word means what you think it means": A proposed framework for defining learning communities

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Abstract In this paper we address the obfuscation surrounding the concept of learning communities by operationalizing *community* according to four characteristics that serve as boundaries for defining a community: access, relationships, vision, and function. Although these community boundaries sometimes overlap, they represent distinctive features of possible community structures. In addition to defining and discussing learning community boundaries, we share insights for researching learning communities. We believe a clearer understanding of how to define learning communities can assist scholars and practitioners in cultivating and studying these communities.

Keywords Community · Learning communities · Communities of practice · Social learning · Cooperative learning · Collaborative learning

Introduction

A strong learning community "sets the ambience for life-giving and uplifting experiences necessary to advance an individual and a whole society" (Lenning and Ebbers 1999); thus the learning community has been called "a key feature of 21st century schools" (Watkins 2005) and a "powerful educational practice" (Zhao and Kuh 2004). Lichtenstein (2005) documented positive outcomes of student participation in learning communities such as higher retention rates, higher grade point averages, lower risk of academic withdrawal, increased cognitive skills and abilities, and improved ability to adjust to college. Watkins (2005) pointed to a variety of positive outcomes from emphasizing the development of community in schools and classes, including higher student engagement, greater respect for

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diversity of all students, higher intrinsic motivation, and increased learning in the areas that are most important. In addition, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found learning communities associated with enhanced academic performance; integration of academic and social experiences; gains in multiple areas of skill, competence, and knowledge; and overall satisfaction with the college experience.

Because of the substantial learning advantages that research has found for strong learning communities, teachers, administrators, researchers, and instructional designers must understand how to create learning communities that provide these benefits. Researchers and practitioners have overloaded the literature with accounts, studies, models, and theories about how to effectively design learning communities. However, synthesizing and interpreting this scholarship can be difficult because researchers and practitioners use different terminology and frameworks for conceptualizing the nature of learning communities. Consequently, many become confused about what a learning community is or how to measure it.

In this paper we address ways learning communities can be operationalized more clearly so research is more effective. The following questions guided our review of the literature:

1. How are learning communities defined?
2. How might varied conceptions and definitions of *learning community* be organized into a framework to guide understanding and research?
3. What are the next steps or implications for research that would be guided by such a framework?

In reviewing the literature, we used keywords such as *learning*, *communities*, *practice*, and *education* to search through the major databases of the literature in education, sociology, and psychology. We sought articles that were research based, focusing on communities within schools where students were the major participants and learners. We were less concerned with professional learning communities for teachers. We tried to encompass many different forms and perspectives, including virtual learning communities, freshman academies (learning communities for incoming university freshman), and classroom-based K-16 student communities. In addition to database searches, we sought articles cited in reference lists as well as other reviews of the literature.

Defining learning communities

Knowing what we mean when we use the word *community* is important for building understanding about best practices. Shen et al. (2008) concluded, "[H]ow a community of learners forms and how social interaction may foster a sense of community in distance learning is important for building theory about the social nature of online learning" (p. 18). However, there is very little agreement among educational researchers about what the specific definition of a learning community should be. This dilemma is, of course, not unique to the field of education, as rural sociologists have also debated for decades the exact meaning of *community* as it relates to their work (Clark 1973; Day and Murdoch 1993; Hillery 1955).

In the literature, *learning communities* can mean a variety of things, which are certainly not limited to face-to-face settings. Some researchers use this term to describe something very narrow and specific, while others use it for broader groups of people interacting in diverse ways, even though they might be dispersed through time and space. Learning

Fig. 1 The defining characteristics of learning communities, representing different ways of defining the boundaries of a community
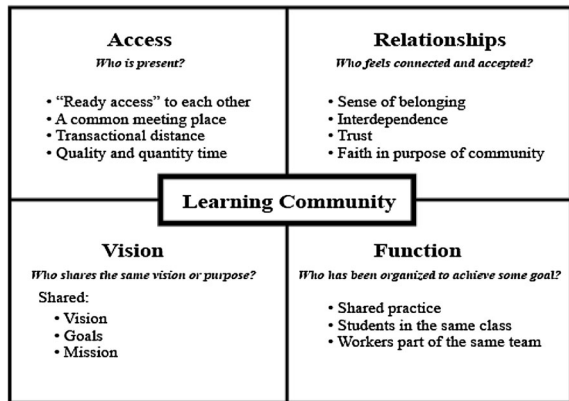
communities can be as large as a whole school, or as small as a classroom (Busher 2005) or even a subgroup of learners from a larger cohort who work together with a common goal to provide support and collaboration (Davies et al. 2005). The concept of community emerges as an ambiguous term in many social science fields.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of researching learning communities is the overwhelming acceptance of a term that is so unclearly defined. Strike (2004) articulated this dilemma through an analogy: "The idea of community may be like democracy: everyone approves of it, but not everyone means the same thing by it. Beneath the superficial agreement is a vast substratum of disagreement and confusion" (p. 217). When a concept or image is particularly fuzzy, some find it helpful to focus on the edges (boundaries) to identify where "it" begins and where "it" ends, and then work inward to describe the thing more explicitly. We will apply this strategy to *learning communities* and seek to define a community by its boundaries.

However, researchers have different ideas about what those boundaries are (Glynn 1981; Lenning and Ebbers 1999; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Royal and Rossi 1996) and which boundaries are most critical for defining a learning community. In our review of the literature, we found learning community boundaries often defined in terms of participants' sense that they share access, relationships, vision, or function (see Fig. 1). Each of these boundaries contributes in various ways to different theoretical understandings of a learning community.

Community defined by access

Access might have been at one point the easiest way to define a community. If people lived close together, they were a community. If the children attended the same school or classroom, then they were a school or class community. Some researchers and teachers continue to believe that defining a community is that simple. For example, Kay et al. (2011) explored descriptions of classroom community from 16 award-winning professors from two major universities. While most of the professors described community in terms of shared activity, goals, and relationships, TJ, a communications professor, explained community as sometimes being defined simply by spatiality—the fact that students are in the same room together. "There may be a room full of people who don't have anything in

common other than that class right now. You know, they're thrown together or brought together as a result of registering for the same course" (p. 237).

This perception about spatial/geographic communities is common in community psychology research, but also emerges in education when scholars refer to the "classroom community" as simply a synonym for the group of students sitting together. Often this concept is paired with the idea of a cohort, or students entering programs of professional or educational organizations who form a community because they share the same starting time and the same location as their peers.

However, because of modern educational technologies, the meaning of being "present" or having access to one another in a community is blurred, and other researchers are expanding the concept of what it means to be "present" in a community to include virtual rather than physical opportunities for access to other community members.

Rovai et al. (2004) summarized general descriptions of what it means to be a community from many different sources (Glynn 1981; McMillan 1996; Royal and Rossi 1996; Sarason 1974) and concluded that members of a learning community need to have "ready access" to each other (Rovai et al. 2004). He argued that access can be attained without physical presence in the same geographic space. Rovai (2002) explained that "community can exist independently from geography, physical neighborhoods, and campuses" as long as "members of such communities exhibit behaviors that are associated with the traditional concept of community" (p. 199; see also Wellman 1999) such as supporting common goals, establishing hierarchies and modes of interaction, and creating a shared history.

Rovai (2002) also wrote that learning communities need a common meeting place, but indicated that this could be a common virtual meeting place. At this common place, members of the community can hold both social and intellectual interactions, both of which are important for fostering community development. One reason why many virtual educational environments do not become full learning communities is that although the intellectual activity occurs in the learning management system, the social interactions may occur in different spaces and environments, such as Twitter and Facebook—thus outside of the potential community.

Lichtenstein (2005) disagreed with Rovai's description of common virtual meeting places, arguing that communities require spaces where members can meet physically, perhaps reflecting Lichtenstein's area of focus on university-sponsored undergraduate learning communities. Others have also emphasized the importance of a physical meeting place to strong learning communities due to particular discipline-specific needs such as medical education (Hafferty and Watson 2007), general creativity (Kristensen 2004), and innovative work environments (Florida, 2002). Lichtenstein argued that the hallmarks of effective learning communities are small classes, which allow the students more attention from and interaction with faculty.

A critique of Lichtenstein's focus on non-virtual boundaries is that he doesn't provide a rationale for his assertion that these aspects of community need to be face-to-face rather than virtual. Perhaps the qualities he describes are also applicable to virtual boundaries of presence [access] and interaction. Graff (2003), for example, maintained that learning communities are better defined by shared goals and values (which we refer to as defining a community based on shared vision) and that online communities can exist and should be thought of "in terms of the activities people perform together in their group and not physically where they perform such activities" (p. 204). Sarason (1974) similarly claimed that "a community is more than a political or geographical area" (p. 131).

One framework for conceptualizing what it means to be "present" or have access to one another in virtual spaces is provided by Garrison et al. (2000) in their Communities of

Inquiry (CoI) model. The CoI model is based on three forms of presence including cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is "the most basic to success… the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (p. 89). Social presence, or "the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community" (p. 89), is critical to the cognitive presence of a community, particularly in regards to affective learning objectives. The third presence in the COI model is teaching presence, apparent both in the design of the educational experience and in the way learning is facilitated. "The element of teaching presence is a means to an end—to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes" (p. 90). While the COI framework was originally created to assist computer-mediated communication, the impact of the framework has been significant in improving educational experiences for learning communities online (Borup et al. 2012; Yuan and Kim 2014).

The negotiation among researchers about what it means to be accessible in a learning community, including whether these boundaries of access are virtual or physical, is still ongoing. Many researchers are adjusting traditional concepts of community boundaries as being physical in order to accommodate modern virtual communities. However, many scholars and practitioners still continue to discuss communities as being bounded by geographic locations and spaces, such as community college math classrooms (Weissman et al. 2011), preservice teachers' professional experiences (Cavanagh and Garvey 2012), and music educator PhD cohorts (Shin 2013). More important is the question of how significant physical or virtual access truly is. Researchers agree that community members should have access to each other, but the amount of access and the nature of presence needed to qualify as a community are still undefined.

Community defined by relationships

Being engaged in a learning community often requires more than being present either physically or virtually. Often researchers define learning communities by their relational or emotional boundaries: the emotional ties that bind and unify members of the community (Blanchard et al. 2011). Frequently a learning community is identified by how close or connected the members feel to each other emotionally and whether they feel they can trust, depend on, share knowledge with, rely on, have fun with, and enjoy high quality relationships with each other (Kensler et al. 2009). In this way, affect is an important aspect of determining a learning community. Often administrators or policymakers attempt to force the formation of a community by having the members associate with each other, but the sense of community is not discernible if the members do not build the necessary relational ties. In virtual communities, students may feel present and feel that others are likewise discernibly involved in the community, but still perceive a lack of emotional trust or connection.

Despite the evidence to suggest that relational boundaries are critical for defining learning communities, Hill (1996) noted insufficient agreement among researchers about the specific types of relational boundaries that need to exist. What qualifies as a psychological sense of community may differ with context and membership. Thus differences in the relational boundaries of communities make broad definitions of relational boundaries difficult. However, our review of the literature found what seem to be common relational

characteristics of learning communities: (1) sense of belonging, (2) interdependence or reliance among the members, (3) trust among members, and (4) faith or trust in the shared purpose of the community.

Belonging

Members of a community need to feel that they belong in the community, which includes feeling like one is similar enough or somehow shares a connection to the others. Sarason (1974) gave an early argument for the psychological needs of a community, which he defined in part as the absence of a feeling of loneliness. Other researchers have agreed that an essential characteristic of learning communities is that students feel "connected" to each other (Baker and Pomerantz 2000) and that a characteristic of ineffective learning communities is that this sense of community is not present (Lichtenstein 2005).

In synthesizing much of the early literature on communities, McMillan and Chavis (1986) emphasized that a sense of community requires a "feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness" (p. 9). These researchers also specified that this sense of belonging creates boundaries—that there "are people who belong and people who do not. The boundaries provide members with the emotional safety necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop" (p. 9). Rovai (2002) similarly believed that community members "recognize boundaries that define who belongs and who does not" (p. 199) and later (2004) added that part of this feeling of belonging is feeling safe in and supported by the school.

The feeling of connectedness within a learning community is increased when members engage in the conversation and discourse of the community. Elbers (2003), in referring to a community of inquiry, specified that students should learn to make their "thoughts and solutions explicit" and that this discourse should be conversational (Rogoff 1994) and spontaneous rather than teacher directed (p. 81).

Interdependence

Sarason (1974) believed that belonging to a community could best be described as being part of a "mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend" (p. 1). In other words, the members of the community need each other and feel needed by others within the community; they feel that they belong to a group larger than the individual self. Rovai (2002) added that members often feel that they have duties and obligations towards other members of the community and that they "matter" or are important to each other.

Trust

Some researchers have listed trust as a major characteristic of learning communities (Chen et al. 2007; Mayer et al. 1995; Rovai et al. 2004). Blanchard et al. (2011) emphasized the value of participant identity sharing, including the importance of facilitator sanctioning in creating a strong sense of virtual community (SOVC). Booth's (2012) focus on online learning communities is one example of how trust is instrumental to the emotional strength of the learning group. In his collection of case studies Booth (2012) reasserted the claim by Wenger et al. (2009) that "learning together depends on the quality of relationships of trust and mutual engagement that members develop with each other" (p. 8). Thus for Booth

(2012), "Online learning communities are not merely websites or database of resources, they are groups of people who come together in an online space to learn, interact, and build relationships, and through this process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (p. 4). Thus the critical attributes for communities of learners are in the strength of the reciprocal relationship between knowledge sharing and trust in a community. "Research has established that trust is among the key enablers for knowledge sharing in online communities" (Booth 2012, p. 5). If Booth's conclusion is accepted, then perhaps one method for judging the strength of a community's emotional ties is to measure the perceived level of knowledge sharing and resulting trust in community participants.

Related to trust is the feeling of being respected and valued within a community, which is often described as essential to a successful learning community (Lichtenstein 2005). Other authors describe this feeling of trust or respect as feeling "safe" within the community (Baker and Pomerantz 2000). For example, negative or ineffective learning communities have been characterized by conflicts or instructors who were "detached or critical of students and unable or unwilling to help them" (Lichtenstein 2005, p. 348).

Shared faith

Part of belonging to a community is believing in the community as a whole—that the community should exist and will be sufficient to meet the members' individual needs. McMillan and Chavis (1986) felt that it was important that there be "a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Rovai et al. (2004) agreed by saying that members "possess a shared faith that their educational needs will be met through their commitment to the shared goals and values of other students at the school" (p. 267).

These emotional boundaries not only define face-to-face learning communities, but they define virtual communities as well—perhaps more so. Because virtual communities do not have face-to-face interaction, the emotional bond that members feel with the persons beyond the computer screen may be even more important, and the emergence of video technologies is one method for increasing these bonds (Borup et al. 2014). As Booth (2012) surmised from her review of the literature, "Without the facial expressions, verbal cues, and nonverbal cues afforded in face-to-face communities, online communities meet unique challenges in cultivating trust" (p. 5). Attempts to create these relational boundaries are manifest in adding emoticons; using casual language in email, discussion boards, and chat logs; addressing members of the community as "my friends" or "followers," as many social networking sites allow; and sharing pictures, lists of favorite items, and music. Through these and other practices, members of an educational community can not only connect but also show "caring" and concern for each other (Velasquez et al. 2013).

Community defined by vision

Communities defined by shared vision or sense of purpose are not as frequently discussed as boundaries based on relationships, but ways members of a community think about their group are important. Rather than *feeling* like a member of a community—with a sense of belonging, shared faith, trust, and interdependence—people can define community by *thinking* they are a community. They conceptualize the same vision for what the

community is about, share the same mission statements and goals, and believe they are progressing as a community towards the same end. In short, in terms many researchers use, they have a *shared purpose* based on concepts that define the boundaries of the community. Sharing a purpose is slightly different from the affective concept of sharing faith in the existence of the community and its ability to meet members' needs. Community members may conceptualize a vision for their community and yet not have any faith that the community is useful (e.g., a member of a math community who hates math). Members may also disagree on whether the community is capable of reaching the goal even though they may agree on what the goal is ("my well intentioned study group is dysfunctional"). Thus conceptual boundaries of a community of learners are distinct from relational ties; they simply define ways members perceive the community's vision. Occasionally the shared conception is the most salient or distinguishing characteristic of a particular learning community.

Schrum et al. (2005) summarized this characteristic of learning communities by saying that a community is "individuals who share common purposes related to education" (p. 282). Royal and Rossi (1996) also described effective learning communities as rich environments for teamwork among those with a common vision for the future of their school and a common sense of purpose.

Another way to conceptualize the presence of shared visions for the community is to consider the evolution of individual members' identities as part of the purposeful community. Wenger (1998), in a work often referenced as a foundation for studies on learning communities, believed that identity formation is one of the principal characteristics of communities of practice,. Wenger argued, "the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities" (p. 149). In associating identity formation with belonging to a community, Wenger commented that as individual trajectories lead people to participate in a community, these members redefine their identities in relation to their roles in the community. Thus part of their individual identity is related to the community identity. In his example of claims processors, the individual workers identified themselves in part by the goals, purposes, and visions that they shared with their colleagues. To Wenger, part of developing one's individual identity is to align with the group: "we become part of something big because we do what it takes to play our part" (p. 179).

Elbers (2003) found that community members commonly evolved in their sense of identity and that "students began to view themselves in different roles and speak about themselves in different ways. They talked about their new identities and responsibilities as members of a community of inquiry" (p. 81). In this community, the sense of the whole and of their goal as a community overcame their individual agendas, and they began to emphasize the creation of the common goal or product more than the authorship of individual contributions to the community's final product. Elbers found that along with this new sense of identity as members of the community, participants began developing a common language as well as common work processes for achieving the final goal.

Thus members of an effective learning community often evolve to develop new individual and group identities, as well as a shared image (or vision) of the group's purpose. Renshaw (2003) agreed and added a caution that participants should be thoughtful, reflective, and critical about what the end goals of their communities are and what kinds of identities they are developing. He argued that more focus should be given, especially as a society, to understanding what kind of community is worth learning towards—in other words, what vision we want for our learning community.

Community defined by function

Perhaps the most basic way to define the boundaries of a learning community is by what the members do. For example, a community of practice in a business would include business participants engaged in that work. This type of definition is often used in education which considers students members of communities simply because they are doing the same assignments: Participants' associations are merely functional, and like work of research teams organized to achieve a particular goal, they hold together as long as the work is held in common. When the project is completed, these communities often disappear unless ties related to relationships, conceptions, or physical or virtual presence [access] continue to bind the members together.

The difference between functional boundaries and conceptual boundaries [boundaries of function and boundaries of vision or purpose] may be difficult to discern. These boundaries are often present simultaneously, but a functional community can exist in which the members work on similar projects but do not share the same vision or mental focus about the community's purpose. Conversely, a group of people can have a shared vision and goals but be unable to actually work together towards this end (for example, if they are assigned to different work teams). Members of a functional community may work together without the emotional connections of a relational community, and members who are present in a community may occupy the same physical or virtual spaces but without working together on the same projects. For example, in co-working spaces, such as Open Gov Hub in Washington D.C., different companies share an open working space, creating in a physical sense a very real community, but members of these separate companies would not be considered a community according to functional boundaries. Thus all the proposed community boundaries sometimes overlap but often represent distinctive features.

The importance of functional cohesion in a learning community is one reason why freshman learning communities at universities usually place cohorts of students in the same classes so they are working on the same projects. Considering work settings, Hakkarainen et al. (2004) argued that the new information age in our society requires workers to be capable of quickly forming collaborative teams (or networked communities of expertise) to achieve a particular functional purpose and then be able to disband when the project is over and form new teams. They argued that these networked communities are increasingly necessary to accomplish work in the 21st Century.

A foundation for the functional learning community is provided by Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. Astin defined *involvement* as the "amount of [both] physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). He suggested that learning is improved when students have both quantity and quality involvements in the academic and social environments of their schools. Being involved socially might be comparable to sharing the relational characteristics of the community, with involvement in the academic work of the school as the functional boundaries for that community. If this idea is accepted, then Astin's theory of involvement asserts that both are important.

Relying on functional boundaries to define a learning community is particularly useful with online communities. A distributed and asynchronously meeting group can still work on the same project and perhaps feel a shared purpose along with a shared functional assignment, sometimes despite not sharing much online social presence or interpersonal attachment.

Discussion

In this paper we have discussed definitions for four potential boundaries of a learning community. Two of these can be observed externally: access (Who is present physically or virtually?) and function (Who has been organized specifically to achieve some goal?). Two of these potential boundaries are internal to the individuals involved and can only be researched by helping participants describe their feelings and thoughts about the community: relationships (Who feels connected and accepted?) and vision (who shares the same mission or purpose?).

Researchers have discussed learning communities according to each of these four boundaries, and often a particular learning community can be defined by more than one. By understanding more precisely what we mean when we describe a group of people as a learning community—whether we mean that they share the same goals, are assigned to work/learn together, or simply happen to be in the same class—we can better orient our research on the outcomes of learning communities by accounting for how we erected boundaries and defined the subjects. We can also develop better guidelines for cultivating learning communities by communicating more effectively what kinds of learning communities we are trying to develop.

Questions for further research

These learning community boundaries are not finalized indicators. Indeed we recommend further research to better understand issues such as the following:

- Are there additional boundaries to learning communities not expressed in this paper but prevalent across disciplines?
- In what ways do learning community boundaries change or remain the same as age and/ or skill level of the learners increases? How do they change as a community matures?
- How might new media in education such as mobile learning, classroom social media, and MOOCs clarify our understanding of the boundaries in learning communities?
- What relationships and/or level of interdependence can exist between learning communities defined by these various boundaries?
- What types of communities produce the strongest learning outcomes?
- What types of communities produce the highest levels of student satisfaction and motivation?
- Do communities necessarily get stronger and more effective as more than one boundary defines the community? Thus would a community based on function or conceptions necessarily produce better outcomes if the members also developed positive relationships with each other? Or if the members felt a greater sense of each other's presence? Does this depend on age or cultural factors of the learners or on the purpose of the community? For example, sometimes creative communities can be damaged if members are too connected or comfortable with each other.
- How do new members of a community negotiate different ties defining a community? For example, how does a new member develop the relationships, gain the shared concepts of vision/goals, or establish a physical/virtual presence?

This collection of potential research questions is small, but we believe that the framework of community boundaries discussed in this article adds clarification to the many

different types of community research that could be done. In better understanding how the term *learning communities* is used, focus moves away from the binary question of whether a community is or is not created to *what kind of community* has been or needs to be created for the current purpose.

Weaknesses of current research on the topic

In researching learning communities, scholars have used a wide variety of methodologies including social network analysis (Koku and Wellman 2004), case studies (Hugo 2001), and survey research (Pastors 2006; Yuan et al. 2006). Each of these methods contributes advantages and disadvantages to the study of learning communities, yet rarely are these methods used together in a mixed-methods approach. Research on learning communities is rarely to study what constitutes a learning community, but rather to ask whether a learning community defined according to the author's fancy impacts a particular educational situation. However, these findings are difficult to interpret without a clear understanding of how the community was defined. We believe the next step for the research community could be to conduct solid research verifying or adapting the framework presented in this paper to come to a consensus on working definitions for the various kinds of communities so that this framework can facilitate comparative research and measurement across learning contexts.

Another weakness in current research about learning communities is the rampant positive bias. A community that is dysfunctional somehow stops being a community and instead is merely a collection of persons. This kind of approach, however, keeps us from learning from the non-examples of less effective communities. As Renshaw (2003) reminded us,

> There is not only one kind of community. When we mention community we might assume some comforting and close set of relationships, where we are at ease, where we are understood and understand others, where we can be ourselves, where we are in flow, effortlessly able to follow what is occurring and contributing our own voice to the proceedings. However, real communities can be difficult and dangerous places as well, where members battle for power and prestige, where strict conformity is demanded on penalty of exclusion and where strangers or those who are different are routinely turned away or treated with suspicion. (pp. 364–365).

Understanding the dangerous and difficult aspects of learning communities may inform us just as much as understanding the positive characteristics.

Implications for practice

In addition to improving and clarifying research on learning communities, this framework can also improve practice. The interdisciplinary nature of learning communities is such that designers, teachers, business managers, local leaders, administrators, parents, and other participants in industry and government leadership are all invested in improving learning communities. But without a solid understanding of *what is meant* by the term, there, is a large space for error, waste of resources, and communication breakdowns. Following are a few ways that having a clearer and more accurate understanding of learning community boundaries can improve real world development of learning communities.

First, the task of transforming a particular group of unorganized individuals into a learning community with specific attributes and dynamics is greatly simplified by viewing

the characteristics of the community through the lens of the framework in this paper. For example, perhaps a specific learning community does not particularly need strong boundaries based on relationships, but has a critical need for boundaries that delineate shared concepts of purpose and vision. Or students in an online community may lack a sense of presence although they do not doubt the conceptual boundaries underlying their vision of community objectives. Understanding the different aspects of strong learning communities facilitates evaluation of a specific community, identifying where it is in its development, where it may need to go, and what criteria might be of most value in initiating community transformation.

Second, this framework can facilitate more efficient use of resources. If the purpose and nature of the community are clear, its designers and leaders can focus on building the aspects of the community (conceptual congruity, functional collaboration, presence awareness, or relational cohesion) that are most important for achieving its goals. Knowing the general boundaries of learning communities is not a method for limiting a community's potential, but rather for sharpening and focusing its possibilities.

Conclusion

Many scholars and practitioners agree that learning communities "set the ambience for life-giving and uplifting experiences necessary to advance an individual and a whole society" (Lenning and Ebbers 1999). Because learning communities are so important to student learning and satisfaction, clear definitions that enable sharing of best practices are essential. By clarifying our understanding and expectations about what we hope students will be able to do, learn, and become in a learning community, we can more precisely identify what our ideal learning community would be like and distinguish this ideal from the less effective/efficient communities existing in everyday life and learning. The framework presented in this paper is one suggestion for describing the distinct characteristics of various kinds of learning communities—hopefully one useful tool for improving our discourse around this important research topic.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this paper.

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