
Children Online: learning in a virtual community of practice

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ABSTRACT This article argues that children in a particular virtual community are learning through their participation in the discursive and social practices of the community. Using Wenger's model of 'communities of practice' the article illuminates examples of children's learning that were a direct result of collaboration towards a common goal. Children regularly puzzled out problems together to find the answers, motivated by the desire to be successful and to gain status in the community. This type of learning is rarely attributed to children, as the field of education often relies upon a Vygotskian theorisation of learning through interaction with expert others. In this study, children often learned without an expert, using strategies such as trial and error, and discussion, and through the construction and transformation of their identities, both in and out of the fictional role-playing context.

Introduction

In this article I will examine the discursive and social practices of a group of approximately 60 children who are actively involved in a number of online activities related to the Tolkien world of Middle Earth. These children, average age 13, engage in online role-playing games where they create collaborative and ongoing stories based on their created fictional Middle Earth characters. They participate in role-playing and discussions on a role-playing web forum that was created by a key group of four children who had met when they first started role-playing online at ages 10 and 11. In addition to role-playing on the forum, an asynchronous text-based world, they also participate in synchronous discussions and role-playing on a Middle Earth palace, an online graphical chat world, using avatars they have selected as visual representations of their characters. As well as role-playing, they do poetry recitals and storytelling, sometimes combining the words and visuals with midi files they share to create musical atmosphere. Some of the poetry is in character; some is out of character. Poetry and individual fan fiction writing are also posted on the web forums for sharing and critique by others. Both boys and girls regularly swap gender roles to enhance particular storylines. Some children deliberately adopt ugly or evil characters to enhance storylines. In 'out of character' discussions both boys and girls willingly share the emotional effect of some of the more powerful storylines where lead characters are hurt or sad. They also discuss and critique the finer points of Tolkien's writing, Peter Jackson's directing, and the actors who portrayed their favourite Middle Earth characters. Out of character they discuss their offline lives, celebrate birthdays together with online parties, engage in quiz nights, and learn Elvish together. The four developers of the forum have spoken to each other by phone, but none of the 60 children has met any other offline. They have joined together because of their love of the Tolkien mythology, and they have developed a community where they learn together and work together for the common social goals valued by that community.

I will argue that the type of learning engaged in by the children in the *Gathering of the Elves* community is reflective of Wenger's (1998) social model of learning, a type of learning as yet rarely attributed to children. The field of education often relies upon a Vygotskian (1981) theorisation of learning through interaction with expert others. In this study, children did learn from more experienced others, but more often than not they learned without an expert, using strategies such

as brainstorming, trial and error, practice, and discussion. They learned through the process of becoming a community and engaging in its social and discursive practices. They learned through adopting identities mediated through text, image, sound, and both within and out of their fantasy storylines. They learned through the repeated routines and activities that they constructed together, and they learned through ongoing interactions with each other. These ways and means for learning resonate closely with Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice'.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice, according to Wenger & Snyder (2000), are informal groups of people bound together through a shared passion for a joint enterprise. Wenger (1998) explains that the conceptual framework in which community of practice is a constitutive component, is that of a social theory of learning. A social theory of learning is based on a number of premises, including: the fact that as social beings, we learn through social interaction; the idea that knowledge can be equated to competence in a valued enterprise, and is realised through active engagement in that enterprise; and the understanding that learning occurs through our social experiences which ultimately leads to meaning (Wenger, 1998). A social theory of learning, then, is connected with learning and knowing within social participatory experiences. Wenger (1998) goes further to propose a model to represent a social theory of learning which is comprised of four constituents: community, meaning, practice and identity. In explaining the constituents of this model, Wenger (1998) summarises the significant terms as:

- *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities. (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

Although the notion of communities of practice has traditionally been associated with adult and workplace learning (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Falk, forthcoming), and also with business and employees (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Mitchell, 2000; Young, 2000), there has been a crossover of interest into virtual communities, albeit with a focus on e-commerce (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Tapscott, 1999; Turban et al, 2000). Also, the four aspects of the model of a social theory of learning and Wenger's definitions seem to lend themselves to a wider consideration of community and the types of learning that occur within communities that have no business or commercial enterprise at stake. Wenger & Snyder (2000), for example, remark, 'people in Communities of Practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems' (p. 7).

In fact, Wenger (1998) proposes a rather different view of learning to that of other social views of learning such as constructivism (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002) and Vygotskian notions (Vygotsky, 1981). Wenger claims that in communities of practice, certain practices and processes characterise learning, namely:

- Evolving forms of mutual engagement*: discovering how to engage, what helps and what hinders; developing mutual relationships; defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what ...
- Understanding and tuning their enterprise*: aligning their engagement with it, and learning to become and hold each other accountable to it ...
- Developing their repertoire, styles, and discourses*: renegotiating the meaning of various elements; producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; recording and recalling events; inventing new terms and redefining or abandoning old ones; telling and retelling stories; creating and breaking routines. (Wenger, 1998, p. 95)

Unlike Vygotsky's theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1981), Wenger's model does not require the combination of expert and novice. In this theory, members of the community work things out

together, to achieve certain purposes for their mutual benefit. This closely relates to the notion of social capital. Social capital refers to the way in which people establish networks, participate and make contributions to the common good of a community, because of the high value members place upon the community. Cox (1995) further defines social capital as 'the processes by which people establish networks ... and social trust ... [to] facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefits' (Cox, 1995, p. 15).

Stewart-Weeks (1997) examined voluntary organisations and concluded that they produced social capital because they had the 'capacity to achieve' (Stewart-Weeks, 1997, p. 97) and he attributed this to factors such as: communities creating allegiances, communities being learning organisations capable of transforming and developing, communities working together for a collective purpose and communities which can put new knowledge to work. Coleman (1990) further explains the notion of social capital as being those productive behaviours that are invested by people into a community to produce a social profit or resource that will be desired and consumed by others.

Falk (forthcoming) argues that learning occurs when social capital is built. He states that, 'learning occurs when the set of interactions utilizes existing knowledge and identity resources and simultaneously adds to them ... Learning occurs *in* the interactions' (Falk, forthcoming, p. 5, italics in original). In discussing identity as a component of social capital in communities of practice, Lesser & Storck (2001) claim, 'a sense of identity is important because it determines how an individual directs his or her attention ... [t]herefore identity shapes the learning process' (Lesser & Storck, 2001, p. 832). In these views then, it is clear that identity, learning and community are intimately linked.

Wenger (1998) also asserts that issues of identity are inseparable from learning, knowing and community, and that, in fact, 'the concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual' (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). As I have previously argued (Thomas, 2004), identity is both a social construct and constitutive of 'lived experience' – that is, it is realized through a dialogic relationship between the texts one engages with in social contexts, and the experiences of the body as it encounters life. Wenger also claims that his perspective on identity 'does justice to the lived experience of identity while recognizing its social character – it is the social, the cultural, the historical with a human face' (Wenger, 1998, p. 145).

Much has been written about aspects of online community as far as adults are concerned (e.g. Turkle, 1995; Holeyton, 1998; Jones, 1998; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Communities are developing in many forms and for many purposes. People are coming together through email lists, bulletin boards, text-based chat sites and graphical-based chat sites to name just a few. In these communities a sense of belonging is established and social capital is built through the motivated engagement of the community members to develop mutual relationships with others who share the same passions, hobbies and values. I now want to turn to the children of the *Gathering of the Elves* community, and highlight how these children are producing social capital and learning through the discursive and social practices of that community, in those ways as defined by Wenger above, for the purposes of mutual engagement, tuning their enterprises and developing their repertoires, styles and discourses. In particular I will use data drawn from extensive interviews with four children: Elianna (13, female, US), Lily (13, female, US), Percirion (14, male, Australian) and Leggy (13, male, US).

The *Gathering of the Elves*: creating the community

Elianna, the young girl who created the community, spoke extensively with me about the purposes, motivations and processes involved in its creation. When I expressed admiration for her achievement, she humbly deflected my praise to the team of friends who assisted her in administering the site. She identified each friend, telling me their particular area of expertise, and what they had contributed to the site. She claimed she just thought of the idea to create the community and it was easy because her friends helped her to develop it. She didn't see anything remarkable at all in what she was doing, labelling it as 'just a game', 'a bit of fun'. When I pointed out all of the processes she had worked through to set up the community, she dismissed it, saying:

nah, it's easy ... you just mess around for a bit and you get it You just have to figure out which 'button' works which part lol and yeah, just about ... most of it you have to change back and forth, and it's like, ok, so this one changes this and that one changes that, and you just kept messing with it til you work it out.

There are two aspects to what Elianna told me that are important in beginning my discussion about the learning that occurs in the *Gathering of the Elves* community. The first aspect is collaboration. The process of creating the site for the community was a joint construction, involving Elianna's reliance and valuing of the varying abilities of her friends to work together, contributing what they each had strengths in. The duality between making the world and participating in the world together with her friends constructed, as Wenger (1998) terms, a negotiated world of experience and meaning. The second aspect Elianna mentioned was the method for learning what to do: trial and error, or puzzling it out. Social theories of learning, which emphasise the importance of social interaction, focus on the ways in which children learn by observing expert others. In pedagogical terms, this usually means the teacher is the expert other who models the behaviour to be learned to the class of children. What Elianna is doing here as she constructs the community is not a result of observation of another, it is the result of her testing, trialling, checking, confirming, changing, and playing with the tools available to her until she is satisfied. Additionally, it involves continually reflecting on what she has built and modifying and changing it over time to adapt to her growing knowledge and the emerging needs and desires of the community.

Similarly, in asking Elianna about how she learned to role-play, there was an expert other in one sense: Tolkien! But what she learned from reading Tolkien was not the result of her direct interaction with and observation of his behaviour, it was a result of her intellectual and imaginative engagement with his writing and with Peter Jackson's movie adaptations. Elianna informed me that to role-play, she just read Tolkien, imagined a character for herself, then created a storyline based on a Middle Earth fantasy as the subject of the role-playing and then 'I hopped right in'. This is not to say that modelling and social models of learning are irrelevant, quite the contrary in fact. Children read each other's posts and learn from their observations of how they each use language to construct the role-play. The point I am making here is that learning is multilayered, involving exploration, experimentation, engagement and participation, practice, storytelling, rituals, discussion, overcoming difficulties, negotiating and valuing identities and motivation. The combination of many elements together produces sophisticated learning, and it is my contention that these elements all seem to come together in an online community such as *Gathering of the Elves*. For this reason, I see such a community as the locus for the creation and development of knowledge, and one that teachers could well learn from!

When I asked Percirion to tell me what he had learned through his involvement in role-playing games, the following discussion ensued:

Percirion: What we do teaches us ... skills

Anya: like what?

Percirion: I have already become more mathematically minded because management of my tasks

Percirion: Patience as well ... I was kinda impatient for a while

Percirion: And it can take around days for a reply to your posts

Anya: ahhhh I see ... but I don't see about task management

Anya: what are the tasks you are managing?

Percirion: I help my regional lord manage the movement of supplies for war and such *Percirion*:

And not only that, but I have already become quite articulate through using Zhou Wei's intelligent speech^(TM)[1]

Anya: grin

Anya: i am still not sure how you just learned how to use his intelligent speech

Percirion: I studied it

Percirion: I was given a reason to study better English

Percirion: An incentive

Anya: where? in books?

Percirion: Books, society

Percirion: Other people

Anya: you went to the library or searched the internet?
Percirion: Both
Anya: and what do you mean by society?
Anya: do you mean you listened to intelligent people you know?
Percirion: I listened to articulate people
Percirion: People who knew how to use the words to make them sound good
Percirion: Friends, teachers, sister
Anya: ahhhhhh *smile*
Percirion: It was just piecing the words together
Percirion: and slipping into the role

Percirion's message to educators cannot be more explicit! In the pursuit of fun and the desire to create a character that would engage well in the community enterprise of role-playing, he voluntarily spent hours studying ways of sounding intelligent! At no time did Elianna or her friends ever conceive of this community being a 'learning community', yet the literacy demands and challenges of the role-playing culture are so complex that children are learning simply by engaging in the situated practices of the community.

Learning the Language of Role-playing

The language of role-playing is highly sophisticated. From a linguistic perspective, the children's written role-playing language reflects a high lexical density and complexity, detailed descriptive nominal groups, and a high degree of symbolism and figurative expressions. It is poetic, beautiful and quite overwhelming for me to read – I feel a sense of great awe and wonderment at the inventive and creative ways these children are manipulating language for the sole purpose of 'playing'. Their characters come to life, as they inject the language of powerful description and emotion into them.

In my interviews with children, a common theme arose in response to my questions about learning how to role-play. This theme was the fact that children didn't really think of their participation in the community as a learning process at all. To them it is a game, and to become better at the game, you just do certain things to improve. One girl laughed at me when I asked about learning, and quipped, 'you learn how to roleplay? I thought you just did it'. Lily, who is 'almost 14, 13 and ¾', also found it difficult to explain how she learned to participate in the role-playing, preferring to demonstrate to me how she role-played, and the following is an excerpt from the ensuing discussion:

Lily: :-) But my favorite part ...
Lily: is bringing your character to life
Anya: can you tell me how you do that?
Lily: Well, my character Lalaith Elerinna is my favorite character. You just talk for them and it kinda lets you relate to the character you made up.
Anya: can you pretend to be her now and show me how she talks?
Lily: Sure :-) I'd be delighted ... Want her warrior side or her Romance side?
Anya: oohhhh can I please have an example of each?
Lily: of course
Anya: thanks ...
Lily: Lalaith: NO!!!! You touch him, you'll die before you ever see your life. You can trust your mind to it! Back up now or I shall throw my sword into your neck!
Lily: thats her warrior side. :-) hehe
Lily: now heres her romance
Anya: excellent!
Anya: ok :>
Lily: Lalaith: My heart weeps at the site of your tears, tell me Tregallien, what makes you cry so?
Anya: awww how sweet
Lily: I forgot what the rest of her words were
Anya: so can we just go back to her warrior side for a minute
Lily: Yes of course

Anya: what special words or phrases do you use to act like a warrior?

Lily: Lalaith sometimes cries out in anger and she mostly has this growling in her voice. At times if I look up a few of the words I make her yell in elvish

Anya: what makes her angry?

Lily: When someone hurts her friends, her, or threatens to destroy her kingdom. What you just experienced was a Nazgul holding her father hostage.

Anya: Have you worked out some sort of background for the character

Lily: hehe, I have her profile on CoE, its often changing though so it might not be totally accurate

Anya: and did you think of the background before you started role-playing or did it just grow

Lily: It just grew. It says in her profile what her name means

Anya: oh, what does it mean?

Lily: Lalaith means laughter ... Elerinna, I forgot

Anya: where did you get that meaning from?

Lily: looked it up

Anya: is it an elvish word?

Anya: where did you look it up? online?

Lily: Yes, It is from Sindarin ... I looked it up on Council of Elrond, and found it in a thing that says Lasto Lalaith nin ... which means Listen to my laughter

Anya: wow that is beautiful

Lily: lol, its beautiful but lasto lalaith nin is a threat

Anya: really?

Anya: how so?

Lily: Well you're saying listen to my laughter, which is a threat to people who were being serious and you're pretty much saying 'I'm laughing at your seriousness' and it could be a serious matter. causing ... trouble is what you're doing

Through her involvement in the community, Lily has learned to develop a complex history for her character, create varying subtleties of emotions to bring her character to life, and deploy a range of linguistic resources to convey her character's actions, moods and involvement with others. One of the interesting things Lily mentioned was how her character profile was evolving over time. As new aspects of the role-playing emerged and new ideas occurred to her, Lily adapted her character, Lalaith, to include emerging knowledge she had gained. Lily's character, Lalaith, had a narrative arc that adapted with Lily's newly acquired knowledge through her participation in the community. The community is clearly a site for learning and intellectual stimulation. To enhance her character's authenticity, Lily also studied the languages of Elvish (Sindarin and Quenya) and knew the time and place that was appropriate for the use of each. She and her friend Elianna read *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1977) and discussed it with each other in a mutual discovery of the mythology and folklore of Tolkien, in an attempt to bring their characters to life.

The ability to tell stories about the exploits of one's characters is also valued and is a source of entertainment and pleasure. On the Middle Earth palace, a visual virtual world, the *Gathering of the Elves* community often meet to talk together in real time, and enjoy recounting their experiences to each other. One evening I visited to find Elianna telling stories in a room which had the image of a campfire as a background, with an animated fire sparkling and creating a sense of intimacy and warmth in the room. Soft Celtic music was playing to create atmosphere, and here is Elianna's story, edited of the oohs and ahhs of the other listeners for my purposes here:

Elianna: it started out in the Elf Hideaway Bar and Grill

Elianna: and I met up with Rain, Lil, Linwelos, Galuwen, Inwe and a few others

Elianna: on my way back to Mirkwood

Elianna: and in this RP, my char is also the Lady of Mirkwood

Elianna: (being married to the blondie we all love ^o^)

Elianna: hehe but anyways we had been writing

Elianna: and I had found out that our borders were under attack

Elianna: and so I went off to go back because I was staying in Rivendell with my aunt uncle and cousins at the time

Elianna: and then I met everyone at the Bar and Grill and they insisted on coming with me

Elianna: that's when it turned into it's own RP, Saving Mirkwood
Elianna: in SM we did not get very far because Eli had an accident lol ...
Elianna: basically my horse was shot in the leg, threw me off down a hill and then rolled on me ...
lol
Elianna: that hurt
Elianna: and that's when Elrond joined
Elianna: he was in the Inn RP
Elianna: but he joined SM to come and rescue and heal me
Elianna: now %90 of the Inn is beat up lol
Elianna: well after I was injured, they came and took me off to the Inn
Elianna: (they also hopped over to the other RP so SM has not been written in for a while)
Elianna: I woke up right as we were at the Inn and they took me inside
Elianna: and then Elrond put forward some very cool power lol and healed me
Elianna: (you will def. have to read that part ;)
Elianna: but it drained him of strength and so he slept and I slept and everyone was tired
Elianna: so no one was paying much attention
Elianna: we had several guests come in that were injured
Elianna: and by the time we realized it was because of the orcs
Elianna: (that had shot Nanya (my horse))
Elianna: we were all under attack
Elianna: almost everyone was wounded
Elianna: (we just described it in our own words how they (the orcs) acted etc.)
Elianna: but 3 of us in the Inn were pregnant so that didn't help anything ... LOL
Elianna: so the three of us and Glorfindel and Percirion played healers

Through the storytelling, we learn about the practices of role-playing – how there are several concurrent role-plays being enacted at any one time based on different realms of Middle Earth, and how the characters will move in and out of the role-plays as they enter and exit the spaces of these different realms. But it is the act of the storytelling ritual that is revealing. Elianna is creating and shaping a history of the community by retelling the events of the role-playing. She is also encouraging and directing other community members to read certain parts of it, as she celebrates the achievements of the role-players, showing pride in their collaborative narrative, and forging her identity in the community as a leader. She is developing a sense of the shared practices and revealing her long-term commitment to the shared enterprise of role-playing. By storytelling, she is teaching others about the community practices, engaging their imagination, and providing a context for the future expansion of the community's enterprise, by enticing others to engage in it. Others can see potential trajectories and ways of being for themselves, which will in turn transform their identities, the very crux of what learning is all about, according to Wenger.

I want to turn now to talk about Wenger's notion that learning is also a process of combining modes of being. This is concerned with the idea that what we can learn from belonging to one community, or through engaging in retreats, sabbaticals, or workshops, can be adapted and realised in another community, the new learning assimilated and applied to a different context. Wenger states, 'our identities must be able to absorb our new perspectives and make us part of who we are' (Wenger, 1998, p. 217) and this both transforms our identities and is at the heart of what learning is all about. I found this to be the case in the *Gathering of the Elves* community and will illuminate how learning occurs in this manner by drawing upon my interviews with Percirion. In asking him about how he role-played different emotions for his character, he revealed the following transcript of a recent post, to show his 'bubbly happy self':

During the dead of night, a certain carriage rolls down the streets. The road is muddy, the weather is foul, but the occupant is as happy as ever. He sings a happy and simple tune to himself, for he has returned from war. The occupant leaves the carriage, his robes as orderly as always, his hair bun neat and precise, he knocks on the door to his own house, waiting with anticipation. As his wife opens the door, he smiles broadly, to see her shining, shocked face and wide eyes ... He moves quickly in, and picks her up ... or very nearly tries. He is physically weak, but manages to plant a kiss on her lips before falling head over heels.

After laughing with him in appreciation of his beautiful descriptive language and in celebration of the humour of writing, I proceeded to ask him about what he knew about the person who was role-playing his wife. To my amazement, he revealed that HE also role-played the character of his wife!! In my previous research (Thomas, 2004), I had spent four years as a virtual ethnographer, studying children's behaviour and language in online chat contexts, and in all but two isolated incidents, the data revealed that children never switched gender (something adults have a tendency to do in online contexts), but in fact performed exaggerated behaviours to emphasise characteristics of their real gender. However for the purposes of role-playing, children are quite happy to swap gender roles, Percirion being just one illuminative example for my purposes here. I asked Percirion how he was able to convincingly role-play a female character, and I also asked him how his language and role-playing changed to reflect his female character. The following excerpt is the conversation that ensued:

Percirion: Whereas Wei is more 1000-words-per-minute, Xiao is more ... quiet and low, I guess
Percirion: When Wei gets angry, he tends to go all pale and speak slowly and angrily
Percirion: Xiao doesn't speak. period.
Percirion: She attempts to conjure laser beams from her eyes
Anya: so she is a docile quiet little woman?
Percirion: docile?
Anya: oh. laser beams. I guess not hehehe
Percirion: lol, she tends to glare
Percirion: But she isn't docile.
Anya: oh ok :>
Percirion: If need be she'll take down that old halberd and shove it through someone's throat
Percirion: Mainly because Zhou Wei can't use it that well
Anya: ok so ... tell me more about how your 'wife' behaves
Percirion: aaaa hahahaha
Percirion: Well
Percirion: Quite thoughtful actually, she often speaks softly.
Percirion: But she has a look about her that makes people know that something is wrong
Percirion: Wei's been living with it so long he can almost smell it
Percirion: And she only speaks in soft tones because, why bother speaking loudly? Wei can hear.
He's the one that needs to hear it
Anya: but did you model her from anything else, like what you have seen in movies, or from real people at all?
Percirion: um.
Percirion: Well I kind of based her around a friend from school
Anya: what bits of your friend do you use in your character?
Percirion: Quite reserved and happy, but completely willing to get into a scratch
Anya: ahhh excellent
Percirion: I learnt a lot about my friend.
Anya: oh what did you learn about her?
Percirion: She appears ... strong quite a bit of the time
Percirion: But once you get past that exterior, she's like a kitten

Percirion's study of his female friend to portray the character of the wife he role-plays is a good example of his use of imagination to transfer new learning into a new context, in order to transform his role-playing experience, making it more enriching, convincing and authentic. The role-playing community gave Percirion the space to learn what it was like to play a female character, and the opportunity to use and modify language for different purposes. The medium of the digital environment provided a safe place for this exploration, not limiting but opening up the scope of possibilities for Percirion's imagination. The culture of the community, being one of character development, theatre and performance, allowed, encouraged and applauded such explorations. The context of community here provides a unique opportunity to reconfigure and transform identities, so much so that all the usual markers of identity (age, gender, race, class) can be disrupted. In this context, identity is marked and mediated specifically through language.

Language, Power and Belonging

What is most striking about the community is the respect and support the children give to each other's writing. They regularly comment upon each other's role-playing, poetry and fan fiction writing, showing encouragement and expressing emotional responses to the beauty of the words of others. Several children commented to me that one of the most special things about their involvement in the community was the way in which they established friendships and felt a real sense of support for their writing. In addition to commenting upon each other's writing, there is also a culture of interacting and responding to writing through the very nature of the role-playing games. The role-playing requires each person to carefully read the contributions of others and use the cues provided by them to insert their own character's next actions meaningfully into the text. The sense of pleasure children gain from seeing their own character and words being reacted to by others is both instantly rewarding their efforts and highly motivating for them to continue.

As far as language is concerned, children are learning that to be literate is to have power. Literate behaviour is one of the most valued forms of capital in the community. The ability to weave each other's words into a narrative and engage in stimulating, collaborative storytelling is considered the highest practice of the community. Literate behaviour is also privileged and sets up its own form of class system within the community. The popular children are those who engage in the most articulate storytelling and who interact with the storytelling of others. Percirion told me that he loved to role-play with somebody who really knew the historical context of the characters, because 'it can get so interesting ... it just makes you glow'. When I asked Percirion what his friends would say were his strengths, his immediate response was his ability to use language for varying contexts. He told me, 'as a matter of fact I am a top student at English, so I can easily adapt to a certain selection of language choices. I am good at strategy, politics, I am patient, and I can charm/persuade the pants off anyone if I put my mind/silver tongue to it.' He then said that he and his friends have a saying for his character, which was 'I am noble when I am good, I am cold and calculating when I am angry. Now, get out of my way before I lock you in a room and watch you slowly starve.' Percirion is clearly engaged in the role-playing and feels a strong sense of belonging to the community due to his command of the English language, something he is very proud of and exercises at every opportunity. His role-playing texts are valued and adopted by others, and so his identity in the group is negotiated through the power of his language.

However, there is one girl in the community who is neither articulate, nor able to always contribute meaningfully to the role-playing, often contributing posts that do not fit in with the established narrative storyline. The children found this frustrating at first and either ignored her or had the admin staff simply remove her posts from the board. By doing this, the children were taking away her right to participate, minimalising her ability to engage and therefore belong to the community, thus constructing her as a marginalised identity. This was forced upon the girl and clearly hurt her. This caused much dissension, as Elianna wanted to promote a culture of respect and tolerance for difference in the community. The situation was resolved eventually by having the girl private message her intended posts to one of the admin staff first to check and discuss with her before it was posted publicly. Through a series of discussions about her various posts, the girl learned the acceptable practices of the community and learned that to belong required her to work with the ideas of others, and to role-play meant staying true to the narrative lines that were built by the other characters. She is now permitted to contribute posts without prior checking, as she has learned the community expectations about the language choices she makes.

Leggy has been involved in role-playing for several years. He is one of the admin staff members for *Gathering of the Elves* and his particular area of responsibility is the poetry discussion board. He established some rules for his board that included a rule that poems had to be private messaged (PM-ed) to him first, so that he could check that the content was 'G-rated' before they went public. However at a meeting of the admin staff, Leggy found himself at the centre of a dispute and some heated discussion related to this strict regulation, as they felt he didn't trust the other community members to do the right thing. He told me, 'people were getting really mad at me in a GotE meeting on palace and I felt kind of cornered and that people didn't like me. And so I was thinking about it and I just decided, maybe people would like it if I left, so I started a poll on it, and I wrote a poem about it.' The poem Leggy wrote expressed his confusion and dismay, and was a genuine reflection of his angst about the situation. I was struck by the fact that a 13-year-old boy

would solve a problem through writing a poem, and I include the poem here to show how Leggy negotiated himself out of conflict and into a position of power.

I don't know if I should go,
or if I should stay.
some want me here,
others want me away.

If you want me to stay,
prove it to me,
or I shall go,
across the sea.

You are all so nice,
but sometimes mean,
I don't know what to do,
should I cry or should I sing?

I've come so far,
but can still turn back
for I have some flaws,
and things I lack. (Leggy)

This poem caused a flurry of messages from other members who reassured him that he was a valued community member, as in this extract:

I agree with Lia so much Leggy. I know that lately things have been really stressed, and I lot of it's my fault. I am sooo sorry that any of this ever happened, and I will do whatever I can to make it up to you. But you have done so much for all of us here, and you are such a big help to me, that if you left, it would leave us an empty hole that we couldn't fill. We love you to death, and none of us want you gone. Please don't leave us. 🥺🥺 (Elianna)

Leggy, feeling valued once again, remained in the community but tempered his rules so that people had a little more freedom in posting their poetry, allowing them to feel like they were trusted to do the right thing in their writing. The new rule he posted was, 'It needs to be clean poetry (no cussing, sexual themes, or things like that). If you're not sure about something being "clean", than pm me and ask me. No racism/hate comments or anything like that.' Leggy successfully used language to resolve conflict, but in a creative way that would not be possible offline. He went from feeling excluded and attacked, to being included and in fact very popular (he was voted 'August's hottest guy' in the 'Girl's Only' discussion board!), as a direct result of the negotiation of his role and place in the community by confronting the issue in poetry.

As Wenger notes, it is through these disruptions of the transparency of identities that negotiated identities are formed and reified within a community. This also resonates closely with Fairclough's notion that power is not an undisputed given or attribute of a person, but instead that it is 'won, exercised, sustained and lost in the course of social struggle' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 68). By doing something that the community were unhappy about (the perceived lack of trust by enforcing such stringent rules), Leggy had met a boundary which was a lack of mutuality between him and the community. Leggy had a choice. He could leave the community. This in fact is much easier to do in online communities, as they have the distinct characteristic of being transient communities for the very reason that many people find it a disembodied experience and find it difficult to feel that sense of belonging to the community. But Leggy was unwilling to let go his membership of the community because he had invested so much of himself into the design, the organisation and the life of the community. Instead, Leggy chose to stay, sharing his feelings through the medium in which he felt he had a special strength – his poetry. This act, and his subsequent willingness to adapt the stringency of his procedures with poetry posting, served to dissolve the boundary and bring him back into the fold, so to speak, developing a sense of mutuality and belonging once again. Not only that, but it elevated his status in the community.

Conclusion

Wenger asserts that a community of practice in which a history of mutual engagement has evolved around a joint enterprise is an ideal context for the acquisition of knowledge. He states that when the condition of this mutual engagement is achieved, the community is 'a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge' (Wenger, 1998, p. 214). The most important implication of this study is to understand the degree and nature of learning that occurred, and the intensity of interactions that occur in online communities such as the *Gathering of the Elves*. The nature of this learning challenges some previous beliefs about learning. Here, children are working at a complex level in order to communicate effectively and efficiently. But through their desires to negotiate the mediated environment of communication, children work together to solve problems, or they teach themselves through self-study, self-initiated research, and trial and error. Sometimes children do have an expert other to assist them, as articulated in Vygotskian notions of learning. But more often than not, the desire to get things done quickly, for the social purposes of both personal development and for the betterment of the community, inspires a passion and hunger in them to learn for themselves or in collaboration with other novices.

In this study, the level of skills children achieve in the pursuit of active and committed citizenship in virtual communities may exceed expectations of teachers in schools. The opportunities for freedom of expression, for the exercise of power, and for the opportunities to create meaningful relationships with others, offer children a place where they can be themselves, and the motivation to belong is the drive for learning. In my view, the *Gathering of the Elves* community offers these children fulfilment of needs that do not seem to be offered in schools. I would challenge educators to bridge this gaping difference to account for the children of this technological age. The challenge for parents, teachers, policy makers, librarians, software developers and so forth is that they all need to respond to the new characteristics displayed by children such as the *Gathering of the Elves* children, and do so quickly in order to ensure that children get the best support in developing these new literacies. It will be critical to offer professional development to teachers in the area of the cultures of cyberspace and the characteristics of cyberliteracies to enable children's growth and success in this sensorially complex, technological age, where computer-mediated communication is becoming increasingly common. As the knowledge from students, teachers, and children regarding new and changing literacies is developed, used and shared, teachers and policy makers will need to become curriculum builders, to make the necessary changes at the curriculum policy level. And when they do build new curricula, they too, like 13-year-old Elianna, may be able to create a community of learning which can become a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge.

Note

- [1] Percirion has 'trademarked' (indicated by the TM symbol) the particular style of speech he uses for his character, Zhou Wei. In theory this means nobody else is supposed to speak using the same style of 'intelligent' speech as his character, but clearly this is just a joke and doesn't have any practical implications.

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