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Critical Arts Education for Sustainable Societies

A Handbook for Arts Educators.

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Chapter 6 Nurturing Learning Communities

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Abstract

Learning communities advance cooperation, collaboration and collective attitudes for learning. Arguments for communal learning go beyond rhetoric of an education that supports all learners to reach their full potential and the creation of personalized learning courses for students to successfully achieve learning goals. The purpose of this handbook chapter is to inform and develop educators' thinking about nurturing learning communities in contemporary formal learning environments which in a post-pandemic and postdigital era are more likely organized in blended and online learning modalities.

The handbook chapter delineates an understanding of learning community and arguments as to why we need to expend effort and time to pursue communal learning attitudes. It highlights the value of positive and productive learning communities and draws attention to challenges that dishearten the pursuit of learning communities. It considers the pursuit of nurturing learning communities in the formal learning context emphasizing the need for ongoing criticality of all processes and content of learning in design and implementation. It also shares teaching and learning practice orientations that were found to work for encouraging a sense of learning community to develop and keep going.

Introduction

Learning communities advance cooperation, collaboration and collective attitudes for learning. The purpose of this handbook chapter is to inform and develop educators' thinking about nurturing learning communities in contemporary formal learning environments increasingly organized in blended and online learning modalities. In a post covid19 pandemic and an evolving digital era propelling us to a postdigital existence (Jandric et. Al. 2018) in our entanglement with digital technologies, it is now typical for formal learning courses to be organized using some degree of digital technologies. Teaching and teacher presence is expected to seamlessly extend across the online and offline space even when students are attending classes in person on a regular basis. It has become a necessity that educators pay attention to the digital dimension of teaching and learning.

The first section of this chapter delineates an understanding of the learning community and arguments as to why we need to expend effort and time to pursue communal learning attitudes. It highlights the value of positive and productive learning communities. The second section considers the pursuit of nurturing learning communities in the formal learning context more closely. It draws attention to challenges that dishearten the pursuit of learning communities. It also brings more to the fore the digital dimension of contemporary formal learning environments spreading across online and offline spaces of learning. Ongoing criticality of all processes and content is emphasized as in learning design and practice implementations. A third section shares teaching and learning practice orientations that were found to work for encouraging the sense of learning community to develop. The examples shared are drawn from the experience of designing and implementing blended and online learning courses as part of the CareSS project enterprise.

An understanding of learning communities for learning and teaching

The attention to the concept of learning community as a strategy for supporting and convening learning and development dates back decades (Benjamin & Benjamin, 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2003) and goes beyond any modality of teaching and learning enterprise. In the adult learning context, Lave (1991) advanced the notion of situated learning in community action based on her observations of apprenticeship practices. In the workplace context, the idea of collaborating with others for learning was further developed by (Wenger, 1998) who popularised the term 'community of practice'. Focusing on the compulsory school

setting, several educationalists argued for schools to act as caring communities of learning enfolded the smaller learning communities of classroom settings (Battistich et al., 1997; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). The Boyer Commission (1998) similarly stressed the university learning community as crucial for giving university students a strong educational experience identifying learning communities within larger institution-wide learning communities as one of the 10 tenets (along with digital education enterprise) for reinventing how to do teaching and learning at the university. Evidently the importance and significance of nurturing learning communities in the context of formal learning contexts has long been understood.

Understanding learning communities

Dingyloudi and Strijbos (2020) argue that the concept of learning as part of a community is difficult to pin down. In the attempt to delineate the concept in the educational setting, Dingyloudi and Strijbos (2020) point to the myriad of possibilities in context wherein a learning community may be fostered. The fact that the corpus of academic literature includes numerous terms referring to the same concept of learning as part of a community appears to back this argument. Terms are at times used interchangeably but arguably, the choice of terminology communicates focal emphasis such as place and method in contextualization. For example, the term ‘learning community’ appears to be the preferred terminology when referring to students’ learning in the context of formal education settings (Battistich et al., 1997; Boyer Commission, 1998). The term ‘community of inquiry’ is more commonly used for emphasizing inquiry-based strategies implementing group learning and communal development. The term ‘community of practice’ prevails in consideration of on-the-job, workplace learning practice and professional development contexts (Schwen & Hara, 2003; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Trayner, 2015). The term ‘community learning’ is more commonly used with reference to adult learning in geographically located groups and/or when one wants to emphasise learning of the community rather than the individual within the collective (Mayo, 2019; Merriam, 2018). In this handbook chapter we use the term learning community going along with what appears to be preferred terminology in the formal learning setting about which we are mostly concerned in the writing of this handbook and the encompassing CareSS project.

Kilpatrick et al. (2003) also note that the concept of defining the concept of learning community is difficult. However, from their review of the literature they derive a set of common themes that delineate it. These include: (i) “common or shared purpose, interests or geography; (ii) collaboration, partnership and learning; (iii) respecting diversity; and (iv) enhanced potential and outcomes” (p.4). Certainly, looking beyond any place or method of contextualization, the concept of learning community certainly refers to a social learning perspective wherein one learns as part of a learning group.

Importance of learning community for teaching and learning

Bandura (1977) highlighted that cognitive processes happen in social learning settings hence the importance of attending to the social perspective of learning activity. Digging deeper, Vygotsky (1978) called attention to the interrelationship between cognitive processes and interpersonal communication situated in a socio-cultural context so emphasising the significance of social interactions for learning (begetting cognitive and metacognitive development). In teaching, the social aspect of learning needs to be closely considered and attended the same as the cognitive and metacognitive perspectives of learning which prioritise the individual learner. Apart from the organisational structuring of learning materials to facilitate the cognitive and metacognitive development of the individual learning participants (and with regards to whom Vygotsky (1978) stressed the need to attend to the zone of proximal development in being led to learning and knowledge development), Vygotsky (1978) also emphasizes the need for the creation of opportunities for students to express themselves using “external speech” which is closely coupled to “internal speech”. There is an emphasis on the socio-cultural nature of educational enterprise along with the psychological.

Research on active student engagement to pursue learning with and from others – so the notion of peer learning (Boud & Lee, 2005; Topping, 2005), reveals further learning benefits such as competences to communicate and collaborate with others. Topping (1996) also points out that there is even further benefit when students take on teaching roles explaining concepts and arguments to others. This closely links to the call to attention by Cleveland-Innes and Hawryluk (2023) who stress that in designing for learning, teaching presence overtakes teacher presence embracing the shared teacher role among teachers and students over and above the teacher efforts to organise, direct and monitor learning activity. Furthermore, research suggests that peer learning pursued online has added value (Topping, 2023) because of the extended time for thinking and reflection in active learning participation. Greater benefits ensue for learning when the learning group becomes cohesive, hence a sense of membership in being part of a

learning community (McMillan and Chavis 1986) and a means for socio-emotional support (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Topping, 2023).

Building on existing academic literature decades ago, McMillan and Chavis (1986) concluded that a sense of community is achieved through membership (and so belonging and personal relatedness to other group members), influence (and so mattering in being part of the group, and the group matters), integration and fulfilment of needs (and so the meeting of members' individual needs), and shared emotional connection (and so the commitment to participate and share in group practices).

Notably but not surprisingly are the recent findings by Topping (2023) who looked into the impacting influence of the contemporary landscape of learning happening across online and offline spaces for group learning. Topping (2023) found that while the physical contact of offline learning potentially acts to hasten group cohesion and so the needed socio-emotional support in learning together, in online spaces there needs to be more conscious and explicit effort in learning design and implementation to encourage and promote group cohesion to materialise. As we increasingly turn to digital technologies for enhancing and providing assistance in how we learn, work and live, designing for learning that advances the learning community – so the sense of belonging and shared active responsibility in lived experiences to take ourselves to the next goal/s of our learning and development – potentially serves to keep us motivated, grounded and engaged for our learning and the learning of the collective of which we are part of.

The pursuit of learning communities in teaching and learning

While the learning community directly and indirectly positively influences learning, developing a learning community is clearly intangible and indefinable. Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) refer to it as “an imagined ideal” and that “efforts to create or sustain community entail development of a process rather than a finished result” (p.122). We can only plan for the development of a learning community and do our best to nurture it in teaching and learning enterprise.

Referring to Burbules (2000), Charalambos et al. (2004) affirm that the effort to pursue learning communities is fueled by 2 sets of values – the belief that cooperation and shared responsibility is effective for achieving learning goals, and that affiliation closely relating to others, makes for a positive and constructive support system for arriving to target learning goals. These values align to McMillan and Chavis (1986)'s constituent elements of the sense of community discussed in the previous section. For a group of people who come together with shared common learning targets, it is not a trivial feat to achieve a critical mass expending effort to live up to these values further to agreeing to them. While there may be observed instances of learning communities sprouting spontaneously, in the formal learning context it generally takes time and directed effort to foster these values towards nurturing a learning community and sustaining it. This is especially challenging when participants come with assumptions about learning being the acquisition and assimilation of knowledge imparted by the teacher figure, or what Freire (1996) described as the banking model of learning and teaching (let alone the issue of affordances of online and offline spaces raised in the previous section).

Focused on online learning communities, Charalambos et al. (2004) note that formal learning groups “continually struggle with the problems and possibilities of their own capacities to become and remain communities” (p.141). Researchers and practitioners single out trust and trustful relationships as fundamental and crucial for perpetuating these underpinning values sustaining the learning community to function as a space for learning (Boyer Commission, 1998; Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC), 2020). Generally, it takes determination and hard work to nurture and sustain a productive and caring learning community that conveys a sense of trust, belonging and responsible active engagement in affiliation. Writing mostly with reference to online communities, (Salmon, 2002, 2013), Gilly Salmon underscores the crucial importance of a pre-process period of socialisation before seeking to engage participants in more cognitively engaging and demanding tasks. In passing we comment that while Salmon is mostly concerned with formal learning in blended and online environments as is the case for us, undeniably preliminary socialisation processes are significant across all spaces and places of learning, work, and life when there is demand for cooperation and collaboration. Participant introductions and icebreaker activities at the very beginning of a group learning enterprise serve as a means for the socialisation to happen and the learning group to gel around the shared knowledge domain of interest (McDermott, 2000) towards becoming a cohesive learning community. The initial socialisation period inviting participants to engage in low-risk, agreeable interactivities serves to seed the building of trustful relationship and confidence in the group to work together and share learning responsibility in convening

and supporting learning as a community of learners. Participants need to feel safe in addition to seeing value in sharing and engaging in interactivity with others of the learning group. Further to this, research practitioners advise attention to the possibility of unwarranted incidents such as the possibility of flare ups (Garrison & Anderson, 2003), oppression and suppression (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008, 2010) among the learning group participants, and exclusionary inclinations in membership to a learning community limiting boundary crossings (Ryberg & Sinclair, 2016). Seeking to nurture learning communities demands ongoing close attention not only to encourage the building of trustful relationships and motivating participants to engage in cooperative and collaborative activities for learning but also to prevent obscure possibilities from happening in the first place, act to end them as soon as they surface and limit harmful effects, and not lose sight that a specific learning community overlaps and sits with other communities and is embedded in part or in whole within overarching enfolding communities.

Designing for learning community in teaching and learning

Researchers and practitioners who specifically focus on teaching and learning enhanced by digital technologies have long been advocating the nurturing of learning communities for taking forward formal learning courses. They stress interhuman relationships alongside human relations with non-human resources in consideration of the surrounding socio-materiality (Fenwick, 2015; Gourlay, 2015; Gourlay & Oliver, 2018; Orlikowski, 2007). For decades they called attention to critical networked learning practices (Goodyear, 2001; Hodgson et al., 2012; McConnell, 1998, 2006) that promote peer learning and educational openness where participants are involved in the what and how learning proceeds (McConnell et al., 2012). Learning is pursued through active student engagement in cooperative and collaborative activities going beyond connectedness to the teacher and resources (Goodyear et al. (2004). More recently, there are highlighted critical digital pedagogical values (Bayne et al., 2020; Oliver, 2005, 2013, 2015; Stommel et al., 2020) that stress open education practices (Maclaren and Cronin, 2018) going beyond open content to open pedagogy (Cronin, 2019) and listening for silent voices beyond the voices that are heard (Bali et al., 2021). This social learning perspective is not in opposition to individual learning perspectives (Goodyear, 2002; Goodyear & Carvalho, 2014) but does invite a social justice lens to expand the understanding of content and processes in practices of learning design and implementation. Overarchingly, there is implied the nurturing of learning communities in blended and online learning practices that pursue democratic processes, inclusiveness, democratic processes, diversity, inclusion and e-quality (Ryberg et al., 2012) strengthened through ongoing critical reflectivity and reflexivity individually and collectively (Beaty et al., 2002).

Within the digital education field, there are numerous pedagogical models that give due attention to the social perspective by factoring in human relationships. The Community of Inquiry model and the Conversational Framework model outlined in Chapter 3 are two well-established pedagogical models that inspire learning design that attends to peer interactions for learning and in consequence the nurturing of learning communities. They have been widely researched and nowadays well-established as pedagogical models in the blended and online learning field. In this Caress project designing and implementing blended and online courses we adapted the latter which turns the focus more squarely on course learning design. But it was not an easy choice considering the advantage of the Community of Inquiry model inviting a wide-angle lens considering the cultivation of the learning community. Additionally, we note the existence of several other emergent pedagogical models that in deepened understanding of the cruciality of learning community development are also strongly focused on human relationships in learning as part of a group such as the student partnerships model (Healey et al., 2014), the proposition of relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020), and the advocacy for a pedagogy of mattering (Gravett et al., 2021) building on hooks (2003)'s notion of a pedagogy of hope. The emergent literature corpus on contemporary teaching and learning is increasingly highlighting the need to also consider the positioning of the participants in group learning and the socio-emotional as well as the political threads dis/empowering participants. They put a spotlight on the issue of respecting diversity whilst enacting collaboration for learning; themes that Kilpatrick et al. (2003) identified as characterizing a learning community as aforementioned. The learning community as a focal concern of pedagogical models epitomizes a sustainable means for creating a productive and supportive environment that of itself motivates and encourages learning when working well. It is a means for cognitively engaging with others to think critically, problem solve, extend ideas and co-create knowledge so developing such transversal competences that for several years are highlighted in educational policy asnd its enactment as significant for the workplace (such as the DigiCompEdu Framework for teachers) and active citizenship (such as the Digital Citizenship Project initiative) in today's world. The pursuit of learning and development in community with other learning participants serves much more than individual cognitive and metacognitive competence development.

As we deepen our understanding of learning happening both at individual and collective levels as discussed in the previous section, evolving learning theory on the pedagogical perspectives of educational enterprise is increasingly calling to attention participants' emotions in learning and teaching enterprise. There is increasing recognition of the emotional perspective in the pursuit of students' learning and the need for "emotional presence" (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). While in face-to-face teaching and learning socio-emotional support may spontaneously grow organically (Cleveland-Innes & Hawryluk, 2023; Topping, 2023), in planning online learning activities socio-emotional support needs to be specifically and explicitly designed for (Cleveland-Innes & Hawryluk, 2023) along with social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Cleveland-Innes and Hawryluk (2023) advise emotional design applications that relate to teaching presence (wherein teachers express emotion in presentations and in leading discussions and acknowledge emotions expressed by students), related to social presence (create space online/offline where students are made to feel comfortable expressing emotions, and create space that ensures that students to express their emotions when needed), and related to cognitive presence (responding emotionally about course activities and knowledge ideas generated, and clarify that expressing emotion with reference to shared ideas is acceptable in the given learning course). The emergent body of knowledge on teaching and learning is progressively stressing more and more the multi-dimensional nature of human learning and so the need of multifaceted approaches that advance active student engagement as part of a learning group that are sensible to the social and emotional concerns alongside the attention to cognitive and metacognitive concerns in learning design and implementation.

Nurturing learning communities in practice

In this last section of this handbook chapter, we share recent experiences designing blended and online courses for teachers of the Arts as part of the CareSS project enterprise. The examples are drawn from two continuous professional development (CPD) courses with Malta-based, in-service teachers of arts and PCSD (Personal Care and Social Development). It suffices to also say here that one course was organized as a blended course featuring an in-presence introductory meeting at the beginning of the course and a microteaching session at the end. In passing it is noted that considering the greater emphasis on online activities the course can also be considered to have convened as an online course. The other course which was attended by teachers of the Arts from the same secondary school took the form of a face-to-face course with all synchronous meetings convening in presence at the participants' workplace. Again, considering the ubiquitous use of digital technologies during the face-to-face meetings and the selection of asynchronous activities that the participants were invited to follow up on in their own time, this course can also be claimed to be of a blended learning type. Detailed descriptions of these courses are shared as part of the CareSS project reports.

Both courses took off with participant introductions followed by other ice-breaker activities following Salmon (2002)'s advice for an initial focus on socialization permitting participants to get to know each other and/or renew relationships when already known to each other. For the case of the first course, the participants were also encouraged to start this socialization online prior to the initial orientation meeting by introducing themselves in a preliminary discussion thread started by the course leaders. For the case of the second course, the open coffee/tea and biscuits table as part of the physical learning space along with the officially scheduled refreshment breaks served as an additional socialization space.

Peer learning interactivities were structured so that the degree of collaboration increased as the course progressed. For example, in the earlier part of the first course wherein participants are assumed to be generally unknown to each other, participants were invited to choose art works from a given selection and share their comments on them in the discussion forum. In a subsequent peer learning activity, participants were invited to share a personal resource (such as a photo) so sharing something more of themselves and their thinking to support the learning discussion (though they also had the option to share a resource from the public domain). As the course unfolded, the participants were then asked to create resources (initially a poster but later also a story), share them and comment on each others' work. In the later part of this first course, the participants were invited to collaborate more closely with peers with the final activity being the design and implementation of a microteaching session. This strategy of increasing the possibility to work more closely together as the course progressed permitted the participants to ascertain the worthiness of cooperation and collaboration with peers for learning. It was adopted in recognition that the learning community takes time to develop gradually building trustful relationships with other participants for learning. The gradual increase in the demands for collaboration, at the same time leaving it open for the participants to choose an alternative way of working and always giving the learning

participants the option to proceed in active learning individually, acted as a means for learning group cohesion to happen (McDermott, 2000), to foster a positive learning environment where participants are empowered to choose actively learning with others in ways that they felt most comfortable because their socio-emotional well-being is taken into account, and so the chances of a positive and productive learning community to develop across time (Cleveland-Innes & Hawryluk, 2023).

For deepening active student participation, participants of the 2 courses were given the space to take on teaching roles, taking the lead to sharing insights on discussion themes introduced, collaborating on performance enactments of illustrative teaching and learning episodes, and working together creating learning designs integrating different art forms. The opportunities for course participants to take on teaching roles served to deepen participants' relationships as well as being opportunities for students to deepen their understanding, practice critical thinking and problem-solving together to advance their knowledge, develop content-specific as well as interpersonal skills, and make learning a fun activity. Reflecting on the course experience a participant (of the second course) commented how the course activities permitted her to get to know her work colleagues better, how knowledgeable and creative they were, and how she looked forward to working with them more closely at the workplace. A CareSS project report specifically reports on the participants' evaluation of the course experiences. The possibility for students to take on teaching roles in this case evidently served to build interpersonal relationships as well along with content learning and fostered the sense of community. It strengthened the emergent learning community and reinforced it to continue sustaining itself.

These formal learning courses designed using an adaptation of the Learning Design model emphasising cooperative and collaborative learning activities alongside individual learning engagement with learning resources, prompted students to work with others. However, throughout the courses, an open attitude was assumed by the course tutors remaining open for the students to choose otherwise and to decide with whom to work with. Rather than dictating to students with whom and how they engaged for learning, they were presented with choice criteria and pedagogical reasoning when a clarification was deemed useful. For example, in the second course which involved teachers of different art subjects, for group activities that demanded creative productions, it was recommended that the group composition brings together participants from different art subjects. There was a hint of hesitation in the first instance at the beginning of the course but in the later part of the course the participants sought it themselves.

Specifically with regards to student-led microteaching sessions at the end of the course, it was noted that for the case of the second course where group cohesion was felt more strongly, the participants wholeheartedly took to collaborating in small groups for completing this last course activity. For the first course where group cohesion was barely achieved, all participants opted for individual microteaching performance rationalized by the fact that they taught different subjects and school levels. The open attitude empowering the participants to decide for themselves how to take forward the learning is surmised as contributing to the creation of a positive climate and so a conducive environment for the learning community to possibly grow. For the case of the second course where some participants already knew each other (or at least had cursory knowledge of each other as teachers working in the same school setting), the open attitude kindled existing relationships for communal learning to develop further, and the creation of a positive and productive learning community. For the case of the first course wherein teachers were generally unknown to each other (with teachers coming from different art and PCSD disciplinary areas, schools, type of schools and school levels), the open attitude is surmised to have helped create a cordial group learning environment even if communal cohesion for aspiring lasting relations for learning beyond the course did not transpire by the end of the course. However, the microteaching session wherein participants took the lead convening microteaching episodes confirmed a positive and constructive attitude underpinned by a growing open attitude entertaining different interpretations of microteaching by the different participants without disheartening anyone. These two courses generally worked well. However, it is also recognised that in spite of principled learning design elements in place, expert organizational effort, and open education practice attitudes in seeing a course learning venture come through, this may not always be the case. There is an element of unpredictability when dealing with human behaviour. As discussed in the previous section, interhuman relations may not always go as expected. Much is dependent on the attitudes and actions of all concerned in creating a positive space for learning to happen and for a learning community to grow. We note that for the case of the second learning course referenced, wherein participants were workplace colleagues so more or less known to each other, the sense of learning community intensified through the few days of the course. For this learning group, there was already a positive workplace relational climate which only appears to have been intensified by

the course. The face-to-face modality of synchronous meetings also served to increase the possibilities for interpersonal relationships to grow – the physical proximity served to build socio-emotional support bonds strengthening the sense of community. The proposed asynchronous activities were only followed up by a few of the blended course participants so they did not really influence the development of the learning community online. This may also be due to the fact that the course was spread across one week and the intensity of the 4-hour synchronous meetings overpowered the possibility of extending the communal learning to the virtual space. For the case of the first course, online participation in cooperative and collaborative learning activities was relatively higher. For the case of the second course, the interactions for learning were cordial but missed the expressive, gregarious mood of the first course. The longer 6-week timeframe of the first course was not enough for a cohesive learning community to grow. Additionally the participants of this first course were generally new to each other as pointed out earlier. Besides, the online modality of the course limiting participants' physical proximity in cooperating and collaborating for learning may have further slowed down or even dampened the possibilities of learning community development. By the end of the course, there were observed the sparks of a nascent learning community, but this was not so intense for any hope that the emergent sense of learning community would be pursued by the participants beyond the formal learning course. On the other hand, for the second course wherein the cohesion of the learning group was strong and participants were workplace colleagues, there was a higher degree of confidence that the evolving learning community carries on beyond the formal learning course.

Concluding Remarks

This handbook chapter calls to attention the consideration of the digital dimension of teaching and learning going beyond the rhetoric of an education that supports all learners to reach their full potential and the creation of personalized learning courses for students to successfully achieve learning goals. It invites blended and online educational enterprise focused on learning and teaching that rises above a focus on current digital technologies and assumes an expansive view of learning beyond individual learning orientations.

Drawing on the rich corpus of academic literature and our learning and teaching experiences engaging in the Critical Arts Education for Sustainable Societies (CARESS), this handbook chapter invites educators to keep the focus on learning while attending to the necessity for paying attention to contemporary digital technologies suffusing educational practices. It highlights the social perspective of learning alongside the cognitive and metacognitive, and calls to attention digital education theory and practices that are principled and backed by research evidence. It sets forth the nurturing of learning communities that advance cooperation, collaboration and collective learning in active participation in and across online and offline spaces and places of learning. Peer learning building the learning community across places of learning online and offline is brought to the fore hence, as aforementioned, the value of going beyond mere personal learning achievement in being part of the learning group. The digital dimension is presented as a seamless facet, and the support for everyone to reach their full potential recognizes them both as individuals and as part of the collective.

In a world driven by digital technologies and increasingly relying on digital technologies to accommodate it and solve its problems, nurturing learning communities that seamlessly spread and reach out across the online and offline spaces to take forward educational enterprise and encouraging them to continue beyond the formal learning course is proposed as more crucial to attend to than any focus on the digital technologies of the day that uphold them. Nurturing learning communities that are ongoingly self-critical in their processes and content building educational openness, accommodating boundary crossing, and rising above the digital technologies create possibilities for learning collaborations going beyond the formal learning course, and so potentially a means for the creation of sustainable societies.

Nurturing and sustaining positive and productive learning communities in taking forward contemporary educational enterprise is beneficial for individual learning participants, for the learning group, and potentially the broader society beyond. Expert researchers and practitioners of blended and online learning highlight the need for learning design and implementation to factor in organizational and support structures that encourage the development of positive and productive learning communities. While all participants need to be willing and invested to collaborate for group cohesion to evolve, educators have an important role to play in facilitating and ongoingly monitoring learning episodes to help cultivate and sustain a healthy communal learning environment. Learning communities take time to grow but their beneficial effects can last much longer and take us much further as continuous learners in the ever-

changing context of work and life. Inescapably, the pursuit of learning communities in teaching and learning is not an easy feat and requires all involved to be amenable in making it work. But the effort may well constitute an effectual and sustainable way forward in the fast-changing, digitally driven, and immersive world which struggles to survive. Formal learning enterprises are influentially positioned to help lead the way.

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