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Editorial: Technology supported learning communities

As newcomers to the AJET Editorial Board we began considering the concept of special interest topics which might be of high importance to the AJET community. Learning communities - how they are developed and maintained; how they are supported by various technologies; how they are evaluated; and what are considered criteria for success have become important design, development and research questions for our own work. These trends can also be identified in the titles of international conferences. For instance: *Building Learning Communities* [1]; ALT-C 2003 *Communities of Practice* [2] and *International Conference on Communities and Technologies 2003* [3] to name a few. Likewise the titles of papers in international conference proceedings and journal articles of late, reflect the importance that designers, developers and researchers are placing on this topic. These are important issues for many of our colleagues in the field of educational technology, hence the special issue focus for Volume 19 Issue 2, *Technology supported learning communities*.

The Call for Articles was distributed at the beginning of November 2002 [4]. We were pleasantly overwhelmed with expressions of interest – 42 submissions from around the world. We reviewed 29 full manuscripts from Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Mexico, USA, and the UK, which reflected truly international perspectives. Each article received a double blind review. Thus, we are indebted to our team of reviewers for supporting us in the refereeing process:

> Ian Brown, University of Wollongong
> Robert Fitzgerald, Hong Kong Institute of Education
> Courtney Glazer, University of Texas at Austin
> Barry Harper, University of Wollongong
> Jan Herrington, University of Wollongong (formerly Edith Cowan University)
> Tony Herrington, University of Wollongong (formerly Edith Cowan University)
> Jennifer Jones, Hong Kong Institute of Education
> Gordon Joughin, Hong Kong Institute of Education
> Koren Mitchell, The University of Melbourne
> Cameron Richards, Hong Kong Institute of Education
> John Schiller, University of Newcastle
> Kirby Wright, University of Alberta

The result is an issue that examines technology supported learning communities from many perspectives.

Chris Brook and Ron Oliver examine a design framework for online learning communities. They provide a useful guide to community

development in terms of defining reason and context to promote community and mechanisms to facilitate and support member participation.

It is interesting to consider whether it is possible to develop community in a first year university course. Working with first year students, as opposed to experienced students, may involve different challenges in learning communities. Dale Holt, Mary Rice and Christine Armatas provide insights into the possibilities and practicalities for community with psychology students studying both on and off campus.

Mohan Chinnappan provides us with another discipline specific community. The focus in his paper is on how community concepts support practicing teachers' and pre-service teachers' development in mathematics. Of particular note is the use of cognitive tools such as graphic organisers and concept maps to externalise pre-service teacher thoughts about the concept of multiplication. This externalisation provides an insight into the modelling of multiplication and teaching discussed within the online community.

Colin Baskin, Michelle Barker and Peter Woods have examined the concept of community from a broader perspective. They initiated a project that seeks to involve various local community participants in the research and academic activities within a management school.

Judy Sheard, Sita Ramakrishnan and Jan Miller present four case studies of courses delivered across three years of an undergraduate program and a graduate program in computer science. Each case contributes to unique models of proactive and reactive interaction by learners and educators.

Glenice Watson and Sarah Prestridge have developed a networked learning community for practising teachers. This community focuses on development of technology based skills. This article provides a good example of results realised through in depth analysis of the community communications.

Khe Foon Hew and Wing Sum Cheung help us broaden our consideration of community communications in their presentation of models to evaluate asynchronous discussion within learning communities. Three key areas were considered including interactions among online participants, cognitive skills of the learners, and the roles of online moderators. The paper also considers some potential bottlenecks in evaluating online discussion.

Themes across papers

The above seven papers provide an eclectic range of views in relation to the concept of technology supported learning environments and communities. The theoretical, philosophical and research perspectives differ, but there is still a number of common threads spun throughout this special issue of AJET.

All papers are firmly entrenched in learner centred education - learning communities by their nature emphasise this approach. Common to all papers is the 'elusiveness' of defining community and learning community (Brook & Oliver). Certainly each of the papers are context specific as demonstrated by papers in psychology, mathematics, business, staff development, computer science and hypermedia design and development. Their purposes at the content level vary, but their generic educational goals are similar.

Fundamental to the educational experience in each context specific community is the consideration that "knowledge is constructed in a social milieu" (Brook & Oliver). As educators, we want an exchange of ideas, collaboration, sharing of knowledge between members of the community, and an examination of different perspectives, as well as members who take responsibility for the ownership of their ideas in the forum. We also want discussion that allows members to articulate their thoughts and externalise their ideas within the discussion forum, or through visual-spatial representations such as graphic organisers and concept maps. Parallel to this process of externalisation of ideas, we also want participants to internalise the ideas of other members and to reflect on these ideas for their own professional practice.

Interactivity, active participation and social presence within learning communities are also elusive concepts. Active moderators or facilitators use different methods to foster learner-learner interactions and learner-teacher interactions. Through these interactions we want the student and the teacher to be "better connected to their world" (Baskin, Barker & Woods). By emphasising this connection we hope to reduce the isolation of the online environment for distance education students (Sheard, Ramakrishnan & Miller).

Fundamental to the approaches above we want to create a learning community or space that allows not only negotiation, but also allows multiple understandings (Watson & Prestridge).

This issue concludes with an article not derived from our special issue process. Coincidentally, the article next in the queue of AJET's regular flow

of submissions for normal issues blends in with this issue's theme of technology supported learning communities. Khine and Lourdusamy discuss their experiences with *Conversant Media*, a server based application software enabling users to engage in collaborative discussion by attaching notes to video footage. Perhaps it is not an unexpected coincidence, given the more intense research attention now focused upon the melding of 'technology, support, learning and community'.

We hope you enjoy the dialogue in these papers and that there are multiple understandings, negotiation and debate about these issues.

Mike Keppell and Lori Lockyer
Issue Editors

Endnotes

1. Building Learning Communities Conference, July 2003, Weston, Massachusetts, USA. http://www.anovember.com/blc03/

2. Alt-C 2003 Conference - Communities of Practice, September 2003, Sheffield, UK. http://www.shef.ac.uk/alt/

3. International Conference on Communities and Technologies, September 2003, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. http://www-winfo.uni-siegen.de/wulf/CT2003/

4. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet19/spec-issue-invite.html

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Adelaide, 7-10 December 2003