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Learning Together "There"-Hybrid "Place" as a Conceptual Vantage Point for Understanding Virtual Learning Communities in Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of virtual learning community as a hybrid learning place. It is argued that a hybrid place experience could provide a conceptual vantage point to better understand the origins of virtual learning communities in higher education context. With some empirical observations it is demonstrated what may constitute students' experiences of hybridity during a web-based university course. It suggested that the research on learning places should include not only virtual but also physical environments, with individually-focused ways. Finally, the role and the challenges of educational design in optimising resources for virtual learning communities to develop are discussed.

Keywords: *hybrid place, virtual learning community, higher education, educational design, collaborative learning, computer-supported collaborative learning.*

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1. Introduction

Looking at the studies of collaborative learning and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), in addition to cognitive approaches, many of the contributors make reference to contextual aspects surrounding joint learning activities. For example Crook (2000) lobbies for more ecological approach in studying collaborative learning. He states that in spite of the growing level of complexity in research settings, an understanding of collaboration is essentially created through focusing on the actual environments in which collaborative learning activities are orchestrated. Also, respecting the diversity of social, cultural and material conditions surrounding collaborative activities could help a broader perspective of collaboration that acknowledges not only the collective but also individual levels of learning (Stahl, 2004).

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Alongside, the current wave of interest in higher education (e.g., Virtual University) sets demands on developing novel educational practices that support collaborative learning in virtual environments (Häkkinen & Järvelä, in press). The ecological approach, together with the advent of educational technology may allow to extend the idea of learning environments towards informal, attractive and rich learning infrastructures that can facilitate successful collaborative activities in virtual learning *communities* to emerge (Goodyear, 2000; Pöysä & Lowyck, in press).

"Community", as well as "communication" and "communal" are words, drawn from the same basic origin in English language- one that evokes some kind of association, sharing and participation in common relationships (Davies & Herbert, 1993). Traditionally, humans have always been part of groups that can be called communities where close ties and personal relationships, often based on kinship and on reciprocity, bind people together (Putnam, 2000; Hyyppä, 2002). What is more recent is the extension of community into virtual environment its members linked globally by information and communication technologies. As such, virtual communities could be seen as one of the spatial and temporal transformations of the contemporary social life in general that are rather supplementing than replacing older ties (Shumar & Renninger, 2002; Parkin, 1998).

Educational research on learning communities has resulted in a rich mixture of different understandings of the concept of community. The concept is being used to denote to "social infrastructure" (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Bielaczyc, 2001), "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), "communities of learners" (Brown, 1997; Brown & Campione, 1994) or "knowledge building communities" (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1992; 1994), for example. Albeit, as the existing literature testifies, the concept of community has been examined from various points of view, research and conceptualisation also involve common themes of interests. Often, it is underlined that associations take place in some defined and shared area- be it physical or a virtual environment. But, it is also remarked that the connection to a community is not only spatial but also emotional and cognitive. Scholars in phenomenologically inspired environmental psychology (see Buttimer, 1980; Casey, 1996; Relph, 1976; 1985; Seamon, 1982; 1983; 1993; Tuan, 1977) have for long studied person-environment relationship with the focus on the ways in which a *sense of place* is created. It is argued that an undifferentiated "space" becomes a distinctive "place" when members come to know it better and endow it with value (Tuan, 1977).

However, place is difficult to define in abstract and in this light, definitions draw on duality as an essential quality of place. It is emphasised that place holds both material and symbolic meanings as counterparts. Place may not be seen only as an entity, a state of being, but also as a continuous and changing process of creation of communal identity (Fernback, 1999). Also, places are constantly defined and redefined by its member (Casey, 1996), which may happen both at individual and at communal level. That is, place is experienced individually but held collectively. Yet, more recent space-place debates emphasise the affects of information and communication technologies in conceptualisation and in this way, highlight the concept of place as *hybrid*. Hybrid place experience, then, does not denote to a single place, but instead it is likened to an experience being distributed over various places nearby and remote, including environments online (e.g. Blum, 2002; Powell, 2004; Rohde et al, 2004).

However, in spite of the increasing number of research in the field, we do not fully understand how communities evolve in educational context. Too narrow focus on the "technology" might blind us about what university students' actual learning environments include and consist of (Nardi & O'Day, 1999; Goodyear, 2000). Primarily, early research on virtual communities often abstracted participants from their physical environments (Jones, 2002). In recent discussions this starting point is made less relevant in the face of more holistic portrayal and the theme is also taken up in the studies of educational technology. It is emphasised that during a web-based course, the boundaries between "physical" and "virtual" are not as firm as many might suggest and in this way, students' interaction may not be restricted to the technology deployed on online learning setting (Dillenbourg, 2000; Rohde et al, 2004; Pöysä, Mäkitalo and Häkkinen, 2003). Instead, interaction often consists of an amalgam of virtual and face-to-face communications where students' on- and offline milieus are not separated but are part of the other. As Illingworth (2001) says, virtual interaction and learning should be seen in a broader social context that also includes face-to-face settings- the physical contexts of virtual interaction.

In this article it is put forward that a hybrid place experience, distributed over virtual and physical learning environments, could provide a conceptual vantage point to better understand the basics of development of virtual learning communities in higher education context. With some empirical examples, the aim is to illustrate how students experience hybridity- what may constitute their "learning place" in the context of web-based university course. Through the examples the relevance of and the tensions between the variety of material and symbolic resources available, on- and offline, are

explored. Finally, it is discussed, how educational designers, looking for innovative ways to optimise resources for collaborative learning in learning communities to emerge, could utilise “placial” approach in their design practices.

2. From local place sentiments towards place experienced as hybrid

The material and symbolic aspects connected to community may, then, crystallise around the rich and vivid concept of place. In its conventional meaning, the concept has a strong territorial connotation. According to Casey (1996), place gathers. Thus, place is not empty of content but collects a history in forms of individual and collective experiences and memories. This continued history allows people to return to place again and again not just as a same position or a site but as same place. In this way, place has an identity and unique attributes, designated by its members and those attributes make it different from other places. Rather than to *Erfahrung*, “knowledge” of place, then, denotes to *Erlebnis*, “lived experience”. However, Casey (ibid.) notes that this experience is appropriate only to particular place, to its unique properties and cultural characteristics.

Place experience can be defined through a sense of “being-in-place” (e.g. Casey, 1996; Lovell, 1998; Schama, 1995) where the heart of the experience is the *varying intensity* of which people belong to and identify themselves with certain place (Relph, 1976). To be *present* in place can be, then, seen as fusion of experiences that take on culturally constituted, material and symbolic qualities of that place (Seamon, 1983). Similarly, the same place may foster different experiences for different individual actors. However, these experiences are not necessarily intense or positive but, still, distinctive (Relph, 1985).

In modern world, the holistic notion of place experience remains highly topical when the use of information and communication technologies enables people to interact and to share information faraway (e.g. Blum, 2002; Powell, 2004). Alongside face-to-face communications, day-to-day experience of living is more often performed and mediated with the use of mobile technology, writing emails and more. This has extended the possibilities to exchange experiences without moving “in” or “out” the actual geographical place. In this way, contemporary everyday life is organised around and defined by a variety of elements from environments nearby and remote.

Aforementioned, place experience, mediated through different technologies, can be characterised as *hybrid*. To be ‘There’- to be present in hybrid place, is an experience of presence being distributed over both symbolic and material resources in on- and

offline environments (Gamberini & Spagnolli, 2003). The hybrid place experience is an experience of about where the participant is but it draws its meaning from the personal combination of the ingredients of immediate and distant environments. It is not completely about either and but it has qualities of them all (Blum, 2002). Its varying intensity can be maybe best understood as an experience based on different material and symbolic resources available (as a mixture of places on- and offline, different participants, various tasks and roles) in the given situation. The variety of resources from which the presence derives, are, then, all necessary ingredients of the situated experience of hybridity (Gamberini & Spagnolli, 2003; Mantovani et al, 2001). In this way, hybrid place may become equally "real" comparing to sentiments connected to "traditional", local places (Blum, 2002).

3. Virtual learning place

Nowadays in university setting, educational practices are more often fixed around web-based, collaborative learning environments. This poses challenges for educational design: it may no longer rely on understanding of learning merely at solitary level. Virtual learning communities- with all the complexity of relationships between individual and collective needs, different motivations and personalised objectives- could enrich learning and enable the novel forms of interactions and relationships between the learners to grow. In this paper it is argued that the essence of virtual learning community in higher education setting could be better understood in terms of hybrid place experience.

However, research on virtual communities in educational context demands a consideration of the use of the term "virtual". "Virtual" learning community is not comparable to "virtual reality" or "cyberspace", even though it may have elements from them. Normally, participants are not anonym individual actors who tend to gravitate toward online community mainly for the reason of mutual interests and shared affinity, for example. But, in educational context virtual communities often arise through assignment, and hence it may be unrealistic to assume that a community holds too exaggerative meanings to the students involved (Kolb, 2000). Yet, technology may alter the ways in which learning activities are orchestrated. With different constellation of communicational, spatial and temporal possibilities, elements of web-based, collaborative learning environments may allow for particular qualities of communication to develop between the participants and in this sense create an access and intimacy not transferable to situations offline (Langham, 1994).

Aforesaid, experiencing virtual learning community could be referred to experiencing place as hybrid. During a web-based course, the actual learning place students inhabit is often multi-locale, a complicated mix of formal and informal interaction, in face-to-face and online situations. It can be characterised as an experience of presence being distributed over different places in virtual and physical learning environments, on campus and at home. To look for the essence of hybrid place is maybe to highlight the variety of material and symbolic resources available for the participants- the relevance of and the tensions between- and also, the way and the level of intensity they come together in a given situation. These different resources may consist of various locales (virtual or physical) and different co-participants involved, varying motivations occurred as well as a range of personal and shared tasks and roles performed, as an example. In the following, with some empirical observations it is described how students' experience the hybridity- what may constitute the lived "texture" of *their* learning place during a web-based university course.

3.1 Hybrid place in university setting

The study in question was conducted during a semester long web-based course. The course was organised for teacher trainees majoring in English philology at the University Jyväskylä (n=13) and at the University of Oulu (n=9) in Finland. The observations here are from a sub-group of three students studying at different universities (two of the group members, Saara and Liisa in Jyväskylä and one of them, Tiina, in Oulu). The group chosen here was a good example of students who were not only meeting face-to-face but also collaborating from distance.

The course was carried out in four different phases. In the *first* phase of the course Oulu and Jyväskylä had local face-to-face meetings where the web-based learning environment (called Discendum Optima) was introduced and the contents and the nature of the work was discussed with the students. In the problem-based casework students' main task was to formulate joint research topics connected with the domains of culture and communication in virtual environments. To prepare for the research workshop, students charted the field by analysing the key concepts and reading articles of their own choice or from the reading list ("Resource Library"). The aim of the *second* phase of the course was to form research groups. During a face-to-face meeting in Jyväskylä, Saara and a fellow student, Liisa, formed a group together. They found a common topic that was related to the other studies they have to accomplish. Later on, Tiina from Oulu joined their group. In the *third* phase the sub-group worked together on

their topic "Communicating thoughts. The scope was to make a profound analysis of the topic and to arrive at joint research report. In the *fourth* phase all the groups presented their joint products during a videoconference meeting between Oulu and Jyväskylä. The course finished with an evaluation discourse concerning the content, organisation and the working processes of the course. Evaluation took place in the web-based environment.

The examples here draw upon a broad range of material. The data comprise online diaries, a shared online document of the group (named "Project log"), web-based discussions (in discussion forums), chat logs, recorded videoconferences and "Net Meetings". Online diary was implemented in the form of text notes (regular personal emails with the researcher) and visual notes (photographs taken from important places, events and people with short captions explaining them). Individually prepared diary was particularly designed to give access to participant's personal experiences also outside the web-based learning environment and in this way to highlight processes that may otherwise remain "invisible" or be simultaneous.

The study fostered the impression of changing and subjective qualification of what "being-in-place" can mean to different individuals. Below, with some examples, the aim is to show how differently members, even from the same sub-group of students (Saara, Liisa and Tiina), experienced their learning place during the web-based course.

In the examples 1, 2 and 3 the ways in which participants experience hybridity derives from their experiences working in online learning environment. However, the experiences are grounded on the affordances and limitations of environments offline. These examples represent either individual experiences or they point to situations when students were collaborating simultaneously with their fellow student(s), for example using chat function in Optima learning environment or having "Net Meetings".

Example 1:

In the fragments here student depict their experiences in online environment, referring to discussions taking place in discussion forum in Optima environment or to information searching in the Internet, for example. Yet, these experiences are influenced by an environment other than the virtual. Also, tensions created by the text-based quality of communication are strongly present in the excerpts. In example, the limited access to the Internet hampering participant's personal contribution to the course or additionally, the fragile nature of communication in online milieu colour these personal accounts.

> […] *"Working today was really difficult. All I got done was answering other people's comments about my comments (plus we solved the problem about seeing and showing our pictures, so mow I am on the net!). I tried hard to create a new discussion about the communication problems, misunderstanding and correction when teaching and learning in this kind of an environment, but just could not find the right words. So, no new discussions. I'll try to make one still this week, now that I have had time to think about it."* […] […] *"Yesterday it was not fun in Optima, as it usually has been. Maybe this time I tried to be more serious: I did not want to comment others only, I wanted to say something that I find important, too! But I was too shy for that... Maybe next time?"* […] (Diary entry by Saara, 3.10.)

> […] *"I am sitting in the Norssi lobby for teacher trainees and feeling extremely insufficient: just few seconds ago I visited Optima environment and became more disoriented and confused than ever again. There is just too much information in there for me to grasp and to go through it takes just too much energy and time for now. I am also extremely disappointed about the fact that I have to wait at least for another month before I'll get my own internet-connection."* […] (Diary entry by Liisa, 4.10.)

> […] *"I'm planning to spend some time Googling... looking for articles about language use and virtual communities. Somebody on some discussion list here wrote about people starting to talk the same language so that they can think there is a community. Is the C only a linguistic thing in computer-mediated (text-based) environments?"* […] (Personal log by Tiina, 15.10.)

Example 2:

The following fragments are based on experiences in communicating online and synchronously for example as a pair using chat or, as a sub-group, having a "Net Meeting". The use of chat or "Net Meeting" was experienced to allow for interaction with qualities close that of speaking, and in this way, to enhance and fasten their negotiation processes as a group. Yet, to find a physical place and suitable time for the "meetings" online was experienced to be even more complicated than in traditional learning settings.

> […] *"Ok, so now we used the chat-thing in Optima with Tiina. She scared me by inviting me in, and we had a nice long chat about our project (our chat can be found in the CT-folder)."* […] [Folder of the sub-group] (Diary entry by Saara, 4.11.)

> […] *"In any case we are now in good phase. We have a group of three (Tiina is from Oulu-group) and yesterday we had a netmeeting with video-connection. Scary but also a good chance to find out how to use the latest technology and how it helps us!"* […] (Diary entry by Liisa, 7.10.)

> […] *"... just think how quickly we reached a decision in NetMeeting! --Then there is this problem of finding a place and a time slot for working here, even if it is only for one person. I really don't think that virtual learning is free of limitations of time and space; these aspects can actually be more complex than in 'traditional' forms of learning."* […] (A message for the sub-group in the "Project log", by Tiina, 13.11.)

Example 3:

In the following excerpts participants share their online learning experiences within the sub-group. It is reflected how the online environment may also ameliorate individual work in offline learning environments. In this light, for example the jointly constructed online document ("Project log"), acting as a visible history of their collaborative work, was experienced to be highly beneficial.

> […] *"It is definitely a benefit of Optima that the group, every member of it, can see all the previous documents, too. That way everyone can always go back to what has been said and done. That way the ideas stay "deposited" forever. I suppose, if we went on with this project that we could go to our ideas and start elaborating them. In any other environment at least some, probably many, of the (possibly good) ideas would be lost because they would not be written down. This makes making notes to some kind of a file very important during the F2F meetings."* […] (A message for the sub-group in the "Project log" by Saara, 22.11.2002)

> […] *"OK, I have been reading your interesting messages [writing to Saara and Tiina] and I even printed both of your 'mind maps' so that I'll be able to really think (and touch) them. For now I can't give any valuable suggestions but I expect to have few after I have thoroughly read yours. We have our class on Wednesday, so I'll try to come up with something by then or during that time. I'll be all alone there so don't expect anything too intelligent, though =)."* […] (A message in the discussion forum by Liisa, 29.10.)

> […] *"I think our project log or adventure log is helping me to keep the sense of continuity: if this document was not here, some parts of our work would seem to be fragmented and not part of a whole. Now I can go back and read the whole adventure from beginning to end several times and see if I have anything new to add."* […] (A message for the sub-group in the "Project log" by Tiina, 13.11.)

In the examples 4 and 5, the hybrid place experience arises out of individual as well as of collective experiences distributed over on- and offline environments. These examples aim to demonstrate some possible modes virtual learning environment can become integrated into physical environment, on-campus or at home. Also, the examples may provide information of events originating elsewhere, not available in the web-based learning environment.

Example 4:

Following excerpts pinpoint to a situation at the university campus, where the virtual learning environment was strongly present *in* physical place. Here, the hybrid place was practiced as a robust combination of activities online and as ordinary face-to-face communications in the computer lab, partly simultaneously. Yet, not all the individual activities conducted on the computer were shared with the peer.

> […] *"Today we spent most of Optima-time [pointing to a classroom session] writing explanations to our digi-pictures. Lisa wrote something to Tiina in Optima, but my computer decided to go crazy so I could not read it, and Liisa just said it was not important. I read the message later, and maybe it was not important, but it is interesting to get a grab of what is going on in Optima -- basically I have to read the messages every time I*

> *see that something is going on in our CT-folder (as Tiina has named it). Anyway, we are learning how to work asynchronously and in writing. Not very easy at times, and definitely takes time. But it is interesting, anyway. We made a suggestion to Tiina that she will start working on our front page and then we'll complete it, let her comment it and then put it into the CT-folder - - let's see how much this will take time!!"* […] (Diary entry by Saara, 30.10.)

> […] *"In the beginning Saara was my biggest comfort especially our f2f discussions, but gradually I did more and more of the discussions in Optima."* […][…] *"My learning environment was Optima, classes, NetMeetings and basically whenever I met Saara and we started to discuss about Optima."* […] (Diary entry by Liisa, 28.11.)

> […] *"Unfortunately, I can't attend to the face to face meeting today. I'm still working with our group (Saara and Liisa from Jyväskylä), and we're going to have our second Netmeeting tomorrow morning. We'll probably shift our focus to making the final presentation this week, though our conversation is still going on. Hopefully, I will have the permission of both Saara and Liisa to take a few screenshots tomorrow if we're going to use Katri's* [a teacher in Oulu] *videocamera. It would add a nice touch to the presentation."* […] (Personal log by Tiina, 28.11.)

Example 5:

These fragments show how the virtual environment may come together with informal situations in physical environments. For example, the online, collaborative work of the students in Jyväskylä was often grounded on the face-to-face communications. In this way, much of their work was done remotely by using private channels of communication outside the public discussions in Optima environment.

> […] *"I think that, as you yourself [*Liisa] *said, part of the reason for you seeming less active here in Optima is that at times I write things like 'Liisa and I just discussed... Even if we are working with you, Tiina, here on line, we cannot help discussing things as we meet around the campus here in Jyväskylä. I might give a hint to Liisa that 'you just might want to go and see*

what Tiina has written', and so the story goes on: I tell her shortly what you've written and then we discuss it and then I end up answering you on behalf of both, Liisa and me.' […] (A message for the sub-group in "Project log" by Saara, 8.11.)

[…] *"If I had had Internet connection at home I would have felt even more freed: I could have read Optima whenever and wherever I wanted, now I had to use timing and place that was arranged for us by the 'teachers' "* […] (Diary entry by Liisa, 28.11.)

[…] *"I woke up at 9 am, started making some pea soup. (Thinking about how I should start working in Optima).* […][…] *"I got the soup ready to stew at 10 o'clock, and finally started reading what you two have been writing here. I sat down knitting a sock and reading Optima... (you can see a picture of the almost finished sock in the Test folder) ... and thinking but did not get much written... but I was *thinking* all the time"* […] […] *"So, what's the point of this little story? It's related to the fact that sometimes I don't count the invisible work (i.e. thinking or talking) as work... but I should do so. Seen from that point of view, I have been working on this topic (though, I have to admit, in a somewhat fragmented way) all the day, except for a few pauses. This is an interesting point of view to look at things and it helps me to feel a bit better about my contributions here*." […] (A message for the sub-group in "Project log" by Tiina, 17.11.)

Finally, through examples 6 and 7 it is described, how students experienced their hybrid learning place, especially the presence of online learning environment during their informal practices offline, on campus (with a pair or as a larger group of students) or, for example, when studying alone at home.

Example 6:

In the fragments here it is presented how virtual learning environment somehow moulded participants' informal practices offline, as a joint or as a solitary experience. Here, participants' interaction was not restricted to the course itself, but students met for other studies on-campus, for example.

> […] *"We [Saara and Liisa] went to have a "quick" cup of coffee before we go and search books for our proseminar, but it turned out to be a really refreshing discussion about proseminars and Optima, too. I really felt good after that."* […] (Diary entry by Saara, 31.10.)

> […] *"My Optima learning experience this week happened on 7th October while we were on our way to a teacher training lecture. There were 6 of us from JKL Optima group and we were discussing about the importance of Optima environment related to our current studies."* […] (Diary entry by Liisa, 9.10.)

> […] *"... By coincidence, I (almost literally) ran into [a professor and university lecturer in Oulu] this morning and asked about new, good references for narrative research or teacher narrative research... So here's something they recommended for everyone interested (I haven't read these, but here's what Oula gives)"* […] (A message for the sub-group in discussion forum by Tiina, 29.10.)

Example 7:

The excerpts below illuminates a situation in which the group members' learning activities were primarily situated offline (for example reading the material at home) and this way, not constantly "visible" for the other members of the group. Here, the main resource for communicating was the remote technologies. With these notes, participants might have strived to amplify the sentiments of (still) "being-there", actively working for the task and in this way, to keep the sense of continuity of their joint project.

> […] *"I just wanted to inform that I got the book we were yesterday talking about and I'll try to start reading it this weekend. It didn't look very appealing but it discusses about the ideas we are dealing here, so it might turn out to be very useful, in any case."* […] (A message for the sub-group in discussion forum by Liisa, 7.11.)

> […] *"I suppose we are all feeling guilty about not being too active in Optima this week. I think there's no need for that, since we all have been working*

> *on our project 'in real life' -- i.e. reading at home!"* […] (A message for the sub-group in "Project log" by Saara, 15.11.)
>
> […] *"I realised that I think about our project (or the two projects) or something that is happening here in Optima almost always I'm on my way to the campus or back home, especially after I've been actively doing something here (read: spent time reading and/or writing). So -- I think I want to find a picture of me on my bike and include it in our presentation =) as *the* context of thinking!"* […] (A message for the sub-group in "Project log" by Tiina, 13.11.)

In the study, the material collected allowed the identification of the continuously changing and varied nature of the elements in experiencing "place" - attributes typically connected to hybridity of place. As observations here suggest, during the course, students' learning place was full of elements of various places and different participants. In this way, insights drawn from the data highlight participants' virtual and physical learning environments as deeply relational, coming together in different ways in students' everyday practices. These observations also stress the positive role of educational technology in enhancing a sense of (learning) place for the participants. Yet, though the examples here provide insights how communication technologies can contribute of making the place, they also highlight the critical role of face-to-face communications in actual practices during the course. But, these varied, parallel, and also to some extend overlapping experiences may only hint at the whole complexity- and the richness- of students' joint learning activities occurred during the course.

4. Discussion

Aforesaid, a place experience is not necessarily tied to a certain location (be it real or virtual environment) and in a similar way, a certain location is not necessary to place making (Blum, 2002). In this work, even a limited overview on the working practices of virtual learning community in university setting somehow illuminates the many overlaps between on- and offline learning environments. That is, students' learning place was experienced to produce multiple and simultaneous practices, various people and intentions involved in them. In this way, web-based courses should not be seen as a substitute for the traditional educational practices in university context but rather, they may have a potential in enriching them. When on- and offline learning environments

come together as virtual places for learning, they may allow for certain social practices and connectivity to develop, not possible before.

As Casey (1996) finds, place is mould through the efforts and practices of those who essentially practice that place. Violich (1985) argues that places and people are inseparable, thus, and as Buttimer (1980) say, to understand how a sense of place is created is essentially to honour and equally value the actual experiences of people involved in them. Participants' points of view are grounded in the everyday experiences of place and in the same vein, place experienced by an "outsider" may not represent the most significant feature for the members themselves (Barth, 1981). Looking at learning as essentially situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), an understanding of participants' personal experiences of *their* learning place could be thereby best created through looking at the everyday local level of practice, in individually-focused ways. The process of studying virtual learning community as a hybrid learning place should not be, then, limited to investigations of working practices only visible in the web-based learning environments. Instead, its challenge could be to somehow cover also physical learning environments and events outside the formal learning practices, be they simultaneous or even somehow hidden.

From educational design point of view, to succeed in "designing" or maybe at best seen as, supporting learning communities in virtual environments to emerge is to provide inviting and supportive learning infrastructures that meet the real activities of the participants. That is, to construct learning environments which may encourage participants to create their own and at the same time, communal places for learning (Goodyear, 2000). In order to make explicit how the different aspects of sense of learning place are achieved calls for an engagement and an interchange between the "users" and the "designers". Here, "educational design" is used to refer to a holistic architecture of designing instruction- to collaborative and cyclical processes, where the role of design is indirect (Lowyck & Pöysä, 2001).

Interactive design process could serve two functions. Firstly, when viewed from the stance of the "user", it may assist and sensitise community participants to become more aware and conscious of her or his individual learning processes. In this way, this may also help learners to situate their own learning processes within larger collaborative activities. Secondly, it could help the designer to include and to foster understanding of various underlying structures and interconnections within the community, which might otherwise go unnoticed and also, stay unquestioned. Thus, in creating a sense of learning place the transition from a viewpoint of "designing for"

towards “designing with” might be theoretically promising if also problematical. A challenge for the research in design is, then, to focus on how to develop a real interchange between the user and the designer. Finally, the notion especially important here is that in educational design, there is certainly a demand for finding a balance between on the one hand, overly “learner-optimistic” approaches (Lowyck, Elen & Clarebout, in press) and the other hand, over-scripting “natural” and rich collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, 2002). That is, to equally acknowledge not only cognitive but also social and contextual aspects of learning collaboratively.

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