

**Emotions Shared/ Emotions Hidden: Reflections on emotional dynamics in  
virtual learning communities**

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## **Emotions Shared/ Emotions Hidden: Reflections on emotional dynamics in virtual learning communities**

### **Introduction**

This research is a study of emotions within a virtual learning community (VLC). We are trying to understand how emotions might shape learning dynamics and processes in an online learning community (rather than simply identifying individuals' emotions in a community). Through the research we are making a contribution to knowledge about the relationship between emotion, learning and organizing in the context of VLCs. The virtual learning community provides an interesting environment from which to study emotion, learning and organizing because the individuals involved are at the same time alone (in front of their computers) and in a (virtual) community. Our assumption is that individuals' attachment to or detachment from a VLC has to be negotiated, struggled with and understood differently from face-to-face groups. Working in an online environment means that the majority of communications are text-based. In the absence of: visual clues about body language, of interpretations of peoples' expressions, and of the fantasies generated from appearance, questions arise about how individuals share with and hide their emotions from the community (and perhaps themselves). Therefore, our study looks at how emotions might be shared and hidden, as well as how emotions shape the learning dynamics and processes that consciously and unconsciously structure a VLC.

Existing research has already recognised the presence of emotions in networked learning environments (McConnell, 2005; Haro and Kling, 2000; O'Regan, 2003). These studies are written from an educational perspective with a view to informing the design and delivery of development programmes involving networked learning. Researchers identify different emotions arising within online programmes. For example, McConnell (2005) reported anxiety while Hara and Kling (2000) reported frustration, anxiety and confusion. O'Regan's (2003) study identified a range of emotions that the learners stated were critical to their studies and these included

frustration, fear, anxiety, apprehension, shame and embarrassment, enthusiasm and excitement, and pride. O'Regan concludes that these emotions appeared to enhance or inhibit learning and that the effects of these emotions were variable and depended on the strength and nature of the emotion. These existing studies provide a good point of comparison for the emotions that were generated in our research. However, our study emphasises not only those emotions that may be characteristic of online learning experiences, but also how such emotions might enhance and/or inhibit learning and how they reflect broader social and organizational dynamics of online learning.

Our research focuses on three virtual learning communities established as a means of improving professional practice. Each VLC was based within different UK universities and was supported by two facilitators. The three communities involved a private sector organisation (managers in the steel industry) and staff within two universities. The first part of the study involved questioning and analysing the experiences of 34 e-learners and their facilitators (one of whom is authoring this paper) who participated in these VLCs. The second stage of the research was based on in-depth interviews with five students and two facilitators from one VLC using a semi-structured questionnaire developed from an analysis of the stage one data. The findings that are presented in this paper come primarily from the second stage of the study, the in-depth interviews. In addition to our conclusions from this research, we develop a series of questions for further inquiry into the emotions associated with VLCs.

This study makes a contribution to knowledge about emotion and learning in VLCs in a number of ways. First, it illustrates the complexity of emotional dynamics present in virtual learning communities. Second, we found that organizational memory is institutionalised in a rather distinctive way online as a result of the archives that are an integral aspect of electronic communities. Third, we discovered contrasting emotional responses to specific emotions (for example - it is ok for me to be angry, but it is not ok for me to be angry with you). We did not find that specific emotions could be shared and other emotions must be hidden. We found that when taken together, 'shared and hidden' is a good description of the emotional dynamics of the organization of learning online. Fourth, we were able to identify emotional responses related to control within the online community, either the self-control individual

students apply (and its impact on others) or the control that was integral to the facilitator role. Finally, we emphasise the importance of interpretation (and the authority one gives or takes to interpret) as an important element in the generation of learning in a VLC. Attempts to control and to interpret were both seen as responses to fears concerning the destruction of learning.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is located in the relationships between a psychoanalytic understanding of emotions, the social dynamics of a learning community, and the organization of learning. Our overall proposition is that the emotional experiences of networked learners and facilitators both limits and provides opportunities for learning, and this is mediated through (conscious and unconscious) emotional and social dynamics within the learning community. A psychoanalytic approach suggests that ‘there is a primitive, pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive and pre-social level of emotions, an inner world of passion, ambivalence and contradiction which may be experienced, or repressed, expressed or controlled, diffused or diluted, but never actually obliterated (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002: 217).

The psychoanalytic approach identifies the conflict that may occur between rationality and emotion, where rationalisation may be used to hide or camouflage a potentially threatening emotion or feeling. It also acknowledges the fluidity of emotions, e.g. from anger to love to despair; emotions are viewed as being in motion, always changing; once we capture an emotion then it is likely to be transformed into another emotion. Psychoanalytic approaches stress that emotion work involves both external and internal aspects, as individuals attempt to manage their emotions within a particular social and cultural context and, at the same time, have to deal with their conscious and unconscious responses to the situation (Fineman and Gabriel, 2000 and Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001).

Attempts to engage with learning usually generate anxieties that can be worked through and may promote learning, and may also exaggerate fears and anxieties that block learning (Vince and Martin, 1993). Anxieties may arise as a result of previous learning experiences, due to threatening feelings of uncertainty, dependency or

vulnerability, or to the work involved in overcoming conscious or unconscious resistance to learning. 'Learning represents a challenge and a threat to individuals, endangering some valued ideas, habits and beliefs about self and others and generating an unavoidable degree of discomfort or pain' (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001: 440). There are many emotional complexities and tensions within learning environments, for example: the real and imagined relationship between the learner and the teacher/ facilitator; the apparent safety or perceived threats within of the learning environment; and the ways in which conflicts are managed and avoided. All of these experiences contribute indirectly to the creation of the learning community, the explicit and implicit expectations that are imposed on oneself and by others.

An emerging theme in the study of the social dynamics of learning communities relates to issues of control: control by self, control by other and control by community and organisation. Until recently the dominant discourse in the networked learning literature supported concepts of co-operative and collaborative learning (Dillenbourg 1999, McConnell 2000), where participants and facilitators are asked to work as equal partners within a process of knowledge construction and development. However, there is a growing body of literature that critiques this discourse, and which suggests that 'the process of facilitating and engaging learning through online collaborative discussion, reveals itself ...to be a highly complex social process involving the negotiations of power and control not only between teachers and learners, but also within the learning group itself' (Gustafson *et al*, 2004: 265). Reynolds *et al* (2004) and Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) critique networked learning and, in particular, the notion of 'community' and suggest that it is often associated with consensus and pressures to conform. For example, a community will develop its own rules and norms concerning emotions, and individuals not conforming to these norms may become marginalized. In addition, the ways in which the community develops its own consensus with respect to emotions will involve an interplay between the consensus that exists within the organisation as well as that which develops within the community as a result of the interactions between its members and facilitators.

The concept of organisational learning is an important one and has been well researched and reviewed e.g. Argyris and Schon (1996), Easterby-Smith *et al* (1998),

Vince (1996). In recent years there has been a shift in the literature away from exploring organisational learning from a technical perspective concerned with information processing and knowledge creation towards a social perspective (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999). This perspective has been influenced by the work of people such as Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Brown and Duguid (1991) and it suggests that organisational learning arises from social interactions. This implies that individuals working together in groups or communities construct shared understandings and meanings and so learn from their social interactions located within an organisation.

**(Still to do:** Develop the above paragraph further, construct a summary paragraph which reviews and restates the conceptual frame, then link the frame briefly to the sections below)

### **Research Design and Analysis**

This study takes an interpretive approach and investigates the ways in which emotions are shared and hidden by members and facilitators in VLCs. It was a retrospective study that took place after the end of the formal life of the community. Three virtual learning communities were established between November 2001 and July 2002, each based within different UK universities. Two facilitators supported each community. The three communities involved a private sector organisation (managers in the steel industry) and staff within two universities. The first part of the study involved analysing the experiences of the 34 e-learners and their facilitators using the discussion group messages. The second stage of the research was based on in-depth interviews with five students and two facilitators from one VLC using a semi-structured questionnaire developed from an analysis of the stage one data.

The interviews explored two of the themes identified in the discussion group messages and the same questions were asked of the students (n = 5) and the facilitators (n = 2). The interviews were structured around the following questions:

*Being part of (not being a part of) a learning community*

- What are your feelings/fantasies/anxieties about being a member of a virtual learning community?
- What emotions would you share in the context of a virtual learning community?
- What emotions would you keep hidden in the context of a virtual learning community?

*Expectations on the self (as student or facilitator) and on the facilitator*

- What are your expectations on your self when you go online?
- What are your expectations of your peers?
- What are your expectations of your facilitator(s)?

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed and the researchers identified comments relating to the community members' experiences of sharing or hiding emotions in a virtual learning community.

## **Interview Results**

In this section of the paper we present the results of our interviews, highlighting the main responses from the individuals involved in relation to each of the questions they were asked. The same questions were asked of the students (n = 5) and the facilitators (n = 2) involved in the study. We have presented the responses separately in order to help us address differences of role in the discussion section of the paper.

### **1. Students**

*Feelings/fantasies/anxieties about being a member of a virtual learning community*

For Jasmine, her 'overriding emotion would be anger'. This feeling was a complex individual construction, built from various related components. First, 'I couldn't be myself'. Jasmine thinks of herself as having 'a very expressive face and I have very expressive mannerisms' and she did not like having 'that option (of interacting f2f) being taken away from me'. Second, she initially didn't know enough about the other students to feel comfortable with them. When she did get to know others she felt that

there were 'very vocal, very verbose' people that 'tended to take over but worse they became the leaders', which made her feel angry. She also felt angry with the people who didn't speak because 'it makes you feel as if you are missing out, and not getting your value'. Jasmine was also angry with the facilitators: 'as a group we asked for an extension. It was turned down which I felt angry about'. Jasmine was angry about the 'expert speaker', who 'was a damp squib'. Her anger was at times a result of competition with/ within sub-groups:

'One of the other groups had done something (a presentation) very flashy, they had a lot of techie people, and that's kind of fine, it was the kind of anger that we hadn't got anyone in our group who could do that... It was an anger that stayed with me throughout the course'.

Jasmine was angry about the lack of time she had to do the course and to reflect on the experience, as well as the feeling of 'being forced to log and respond'. Jasmine acknowledged that anger is a common response for her: 'you should know that I'm an angry person anyway'.

Patricia found the experience 'frightening' and 'unnerving', she was cautious in her interactions. There were two aspects to her fear. First, she felt as if she 'didn't have as much control as could have been in a face-to-face environment'. Second, she was afraid of seeming hostile. 'Online there's that distance, time for people to dwell on things and be concerned by how they've been taken... it's very unnerving really. Being quite new to online you tread with caution'. For Patricia, the flexibility of the online environment produced mixed emotions, 'you are either disappointed or overwhelmed'. On one hand it is very flexible because 'you can dip in and out'; on the other hand it is frustrating because 'you are waiting for messages to come in'. She thinks that it is important to get everyone's input, but that at times you get 'a blank wall'. She points out that 'it's not a community if you are on your own'. Denise reflects that 'the feelings of community were immensely strong'. At a personal level she was 'nervous, nervous that it wouldn't work that I wouldn't get support'.

Graeme's over-riding emotion at the beginning of the community was anxiety; 'a generalised anxiety. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what we would



actually be asked to do', feeling that 'I don't know why I'm here.' Graeme's anxiety was specific as well as general. He was worried about having to 'expose myself as someone who couldn't type very quickly... it reinforced my initial anxieties about what on earth this was'. Graeme felt the need for reassurance, but also thought that reassurance was a difficult thing to provide online. Andrea was aware of this being her first experience of an online community. She asked herself: 'was I intelligent enough', she 'felt stupid... and it seemed to spiral from there'. Her self-doubt was reinforced by doubt in relation to others, 'would I be accepted and valued'? Her feelings were changed by the support she received from the group; 'it started off really badly but ended up really positively with the group'.

*What emotions would you share in the context of a virtual learning community?*

Jasmine thinks of herself as 'fairly honest' and someone who tends to 'say things as I feel them'. However, she is also aware that once you have said something 'you can't like retract it', you can't say 'forget I said that when it's not come out as you meant it whereas on-line everything is there in the archives for everyone to look at and you think how it is open to interpretation'. Her honesty is pragmatic - she wouldn't share 'some of the underlying worries about the course because that would imply that I don't know what I'm doing'. She thinks that honesty can also come across as harshness: 'I know when I talk I communicate in a straightforward manner and when I e-mail or write electronically it probably comes across a little bit harsher than it should be'.

Patricia believes that 'it's important to become involved in the discussions', not to become 'isolated'. She says that 'it's important to share your vulnerability'. She uses the word 'sharing' to express both the individual involvement that arises when an individual says what s/he feels, and the sense of community that makes the expression of feelings more likely: 'without the community it would have been a very very different learning experience'. Denise believes that she would 'share anything (laughs) I'm terrible for that' I'll tell anyone how I'm feeling at any point in time'. She would 'be quite happy to tell people if I was scared, nervous or angry'. However, she 'probably wouldn't tell someone they made me angry... I think probably that's the only one I would shy away from because you are normally angry at someone or at

something'. Andrea said that she 'shared everything'. At the start of the course she 'felt really bad saying I was having problems. Then I thought well at the end of the day it isn't my fault... so I may as well be up front and tell everyone and get it out so that if anyone was angry with me at least they knew where I was coming from'.

Graeme is the opposite of Denise and Andrea. He would share 'very few (feelings) ... I mean I know people who would admit to their anxieties. I wouldn't. My immediate reaction is that I know some people do but it doesn't come naturally to me. I wouldn't circulate my feelings'.

*What emotions would you keep hidden in the context of a virtual learning community?*

Jasmine responded to this question but did not reveal emotions that she would keep hidden in the VLC. Patricia was 'careful' and 'cautious' about being over-confident. She said, 'you have to be very sensitive to all the people around you even though you can't see them'. She was cautious because 'you can easily cause offence in an online community... people could see you as bolshie or cocky or something like that'. The danger she perceived here was in putting 'people's backs up'. This made Patricia behave in a different way from normal: 'you'd be much more polite than normal... I think you've got to keep the emotions appropriate to the event... You don't want to be showing over-emotion of happiness, or joy or even anger'. Denise was very clear about one thing that she would not share online - 'anger'. Graeme would 'try and keep all my negative emotions hidden and my self doubt'. However, there is judgement needed here because 'I don't think it would be very good if you are not prepared to give'. Graeme would try to avoid situations where he feels he is 'behind' or where he hasn't done what was required. He said, 'I would try to avoid letting my anxieties about that be known'. Andrea would keep nothing hidden, 'it's the kind of person I am. I can't lie very well. If I think it then I show it'.

*What are your expectations on your self when you go online?*

Jasmine's expectations were that she would 'come across as being professional, well read, clear about the points I tried to make'. Her concern was to be 'knowledgeable', which meant 'I want to come across as not being the thicko of the class'. Denise also expected herself to be 'professional'. To her this meant being 'reasoned' and not

putting others in an uncomfortable position. 'I would want to be reasoned, I wouldn't want to express anger or insult anyone. I would probably try and draw back in a way or avoid it... avoid putting other people in an uncomfortable position'. Patricia wanted to 'be seen in the group', particularly to be seen as an 'equal' member of the group and someone who 'didn't want to let people down'. For her, an important expectation was that she would achieve something. 'I felt a little isolated or not, at times, because I wasn't achieving as much' (as others). Andrea's expectations on herself 'were very very high. I think it is true of everything that I do. I just want to do the best I can... I think if everything had worked well I don't think I'd have learned half of what I did. At first I felt so angry because I felt so stupid'. Graeme's expectations were 'that I will do whatever I can to allow people a positive experience and I don't expect I'll always achieve that'. In addition he expected the group to form as a community.

*What are your expectations of your peers?*

Jasmine wanted her fellow students 'to read everything I put down'. She was (to say the least) suspicious of her peers until she got to know them:

'Because I didn't know them, I know I assumed they'd ridicule everything I said... I didn't really expect support... I assumed we were all like lone sharks, circling around, that we were all there to kill each other and get the best and to be the best and to screw you if they could'.

Patricia expected 'support'. For her support was a mutual process, 'you know I'd like to think that my contributions developed other people and vice versa'. Denise hoped 'that other people would come into it open minded'; that they would 'point out problems with my reasoning'; that they would 'join in' and to be able 'to express what they think at any point' to 'feel able and free to make almost outrageous statements if that was they way they felt they needed to express themselves'. Andrea and Graeme both expected a lot from the group. For Andrea she 'really wanted and expected them to contribute a 100% and I expected them to be very supportive'. Similarly, Graeme expected 'that people would be putting as much into it as I was'.

He reflected that ‘when members of the group don’t participate, they feel very let down’.

*What are your expectations of your facilitator(s)?*

Jasmine was upset by the ‘interference’ from the facilitators: ‘I remember (them) checking up on us for not contributing and that felt like interference rather than support’. Patricia’s expectations of the tutors were high. However, she reflects that ‘we had to get over the fact we had to generate our own learning and that the tutors were there to support rather than to deliver’. She was ‘confused in relation to the role the tutors played’. Graeme was also unclear about the facilitators’ role. He said, ‘I really didn’t know; that was part of the anxiety... I didn’t know how it would be run at all... I wasn’t quite clear about what you were going to be doing’. Denise had no such confusion. She liked the fact that if something ‘didn’t go quite right’, then they were happy to explore why. She appreciated that the facilitators ‘didn’t feel the need to be totally in control’ or need to ‘be accepted as the experts’. She liked the feeling that the facilitators might also be learning and ‘growing with the team’. Denise was also aware that ‘there are some facilitators you will get on with and some you won’t’. Andrea had no expectations of the facilitators, she said, ‘I’m always a bit cautious asking for support from academics’.

## **2. Facilitators**

*Feelings/fantasies/anxieties about being a member of a virtual learning community?*

Valerie has ‘very positive feelings about membership of a VLC... It’s a very imaginative experience. You imagine what the people are going to be like in the virtual community. One thing I’ve found is that people are never as you expect them to be’. (She gives an example of her thoughts on a particular individual). ‘I thought he was pompous before I met him and I didn’t get his sense of humour in a VLC. So my fantasy of him was he was a little pompous man and when I met him was a very warm human being with ... a really good sense of humour and I interpreted his messages in a completely different way once I met him’. Being in a VLC ‘makes you feel a bit more exposed... and sometimes the mind thinks that I won’t be intelligent enough to

cope with all the questions or issues that arise in a VLC. There is some anxiety about the feeling that everything you say is written and there in hard evidence and sometimes that is a little bit daunting'. As a facilitator 'you feel under more pressure to respond in an intelligent way'.

Bridget also talks about positive feelings. She 'expects some fun, I've been in situations where there has been really good online humour. I have also been in some tricky situations e.g. where people's anxieties have meant that they've struck out at others in the community. That sort of situation is horrible – much harder to work with than face-to-face. I find that you can spend ages working out an on-line response. Sometimes it's more effective to pick up the phone'. Bridget also recognises that assumptions made about people online can be 'completely wrong'. She provides an example: 'I assumed someone was male and built up a picture of a stereotypical techie character and I then discovered it was a woman! I immediately began building a new picture of this person'. In the role of facilitator Bridget gets 'anxious about missing key messages'. She is 'very very careful about checking and reading everything in detail'.

*What emotions would you share in the context of a virtual learning community?*

Valerie interpreted this question as: 'what emotions can be shown in a VLC?' She talked about a situation where:

'I made a definite decision to surface emotions and to talk about feelings as I felt we needed to develop trust within that VLC and I thought that one way of developing trust is to own feelings and then share those feelings. You need to share some emotions and I felt that was encouraging to them and sometimes I shared more of my feelings in a learning community than I would do in a face to face situation. I think in order to build that trust at times I made real positive decisions about talking about feeling vulnerable'.

Valerie reflects that 'if you have one member who shares feelings and the others don't' then that individual can feel 'very exposed'. At this point, the sharing of the

facilitator's own feelings can be 'a way of offering support really so that that person wouldn't have felt exposed too much in that situation'.

Bridget would 'share positive emotions using words like enjoy, interesting, fun'. She 'wouldn't share any strong negative emotions or I'd wait until they had calmed down before sharing a watered down version'. She provides an example:

'I was once in a group where another member tried to take over the group and really dominated. I felt quite angry but didn't share my anger online. Later in that group and once I got to know this person better I did tell him online that I had been irritated by his behaviour at the start of the group. He was horrified and we had quite a debate about it. Overall I wish that I hadn't shared my anger (even though I used words such as irritation) as it seemed to cause rift in our relationship for a while'.

Bridget manages 'strong negative emotions' offline, discussing them either with her co-facilitator or another colleague. She has learned 'to use rather neutral language as different people will react very differently to emotive words'.

*What emotions would you keep hidden in the context of a virtual learning community?*

Valerie thinks that 'anger is very dangerous in a VLC', that it can 'lead to all sorts of unnecessary tension so I think I'd try and keep anger under control. I think I'd occasionally in the learning community have felt intense irritation ... I've been pushed to extremes to express irritation... I think I'd probably hide if I was hurt or upset by something someone said in a VLC I don't think I'd tackle that head on'. Difficult moments have been dealt with 'outside the virtual environment'. She gives an example: 'We had that problem with Trevor going from group to group and saying he didn't like them. Well, I didn't think the way to handle that one was to send messages within the virtual community I think it was necessary to talk to him and find out what the situation was'.

*What are your expectations on your self when you go online?*

Valerie expects ‘to give care and attention to the messages, I expect to read all the messages in there and to reflect on each message and that’s the standard that I expect of myself... I expect to do what I say I’ll do within a VLC’. Valerie would not ‘use abusive language’ or show disrespect. Bridget also recognises the responsibility ‘to go on-line regularly and to be responsive but not to dominate, to think about the other person and group as a whole... to be honest (though this contradicts what I said earlier about not sharing strong feelings)’ for Bridget this is about ‘behaving in a way that is professional’.

*What are your expectations of your peers?*

Valerie’s expectations on the group are clear: ‘I’d expect them not to use abusive language and for them not to flame or send any angry or abusive messages in a VLC environment against another person outside or within the VLC. I suppose I’d expect people to show consideration to each other’. If group members were not offering enough support then ‘I’d try and compensate by offering more support’. She sees the strength of the facilitator role as being ‘always tuned in to how students might be feeling’. Bridget’s expectations are ‘to be honest and respectful’. However, ‘the one thing that I really dislike is if there is a joker or saboteur who plays tricks within and on the community – it can be very destructive’.

*What are your expectations of your facilitator(s)?*

Valerie expected to be able to ‘manage difficult situations and manage difficult students, offer support to quieter students if they need it. Maybe at times manage over dominant members in the group’. Bridget reflects on the role through a specific example:

‘Facilitators have a responsibility to intervene in tricky situations. I can think of one community where there was a big fallout in a group and the two facilitators (who were academics) didn’t intervene. It felt as if they weren’t taking responsibility. There was also a sense that they were using us as guinea pigs and would write us up as an example for their research – this is what ultimately happened. I still feel annoyed and let down by it. It feels as if they cheated us. It means that at the start of a community I think there needs to be a

discussion about ethics and roles/ responsibilities. It sounds a bit boring but can help prevent future problems’.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings illustrate that the emotional experience of virtual learning communities is complex and at times contradictory. The emotions associated with learning online are not simple constructions. For example, for one of our student respondents, anger is made up from feeling uncomfortable and unfamiliar with others; from competition between others; and from expectations of the content of the experience and how it is managed. This suggests to us that the emotional complexity of online learning is no different to the emotional complexity of face-to-face learning groups. However, our results also point to feelings and experiences that seem characteristic of virtual learning communities. For example, the archives that are integral to online learning environments make individuals both more aware and wary of what they communicate of themselves and their emotions. This applied both to the experience of the students and the facilitators in the sample group. People in virtual learning communities are seen to have time to dwell on (and have hard evidence of) what has been said, in a different way than in face-to-face groups. This can strengthen peoples’ fears about how and why their words are interpreted. Students’ felt that they had ‘less control’ online and facilitators’ felt that they needed to exert more control online (e.g. to keep out ‘negative emotions’). The fact that all postings to the community are in the archives makes for an overt form of organizational memory and one that is potentially available to organisational members who were not part of the VLC.

The interviews depict the emotional complexity of the online experience, and in recognising this, we have become aware that it is not enough simply to ask what emotions may be shared and what emotions may be hidden. In addition, our method (a very small sample) and our results (from loosely structured interviews) do not lend themselves to generalisations in relation to this distinction (shared and hidden) as a form of understanding of individual or collective behaviour. However, what they do demonstrate is that ‘shared’ and ‘hidden’ are two parts of an inter-dependent process that may describe well *the emotional experience of online learning*. While it is not possible from our study to say that these emotions are shared and these are hidden, it



is possible to see how shared and hidden together provide a rich description of the contrasting emotions that are part of online experience.

For example, the students in this study felt simultaneously both involved and isolated; the desire to keep emotions hidden and to give of themselves emotionally are concurrent feelings. Students felt both attached and detached; mixing desires to be emotionally connected to the community with expectations of the need to behave in a 'professional' (i.e. distanced) way. Students were afraid of giving offence, they felt the pressure to be 'more polite than normal' and yet there was delight expressed at the possibility of being able to make 'almost outrageous statements'. The desire to share with and to receive support from others was mixed with fears about sharing with and receiving support from others. Feelings towards the facilitators were also in contrast, ranging from a perception of their interference to an understanding of their role in providing support rather than delivery. Contrasting feelings were also present for the facilitators of online learning. At the same time as being aware of the need to be honest, the limitations of honesty were set through the choice not to 'share any strong negative emotions' and through the perception that 'anger is very dangerous in a VLC'.

Facilitators in an online environment seem to be faced with several difficult questions. For example, to what extent does the sharing of feelings by the facilitators help others to learn or restrict their learning? The impact and implications of conflict online are not easy to gauge, therefore, is learning made possible through confrontation of (difficult) others online or is learning undermined through such intervention? While facilitators have 'a responsibility to intervene', the boundaries of such intervention can remain as unclear for the facilitators as for the students, therefore, where is the line between being responsive but not dominating? For the facilitators, intervention varied in this sample from giving 'care and attention' to being the neighbourhood watch for 'abusive' behaviour and for negative emotions.

It is clear that much depends on the *interpretation* of feeling, language and behaviour in determining the nature of the online learning experience. Interpretation, in the sense of responding to others through association with their messages (from similar and different roles) is good since it provides the basis for interaction and for the

generation of community. At the same time, there is always the risk in interpreting others' interventions that one may generate conflicts and fears of destruction and destructiveness within the community. The emotions that members of VLCs bring with them combine in ways that quickly shape and define the learning environment. Therefore, it is possible to be angry, but very difficult to be 'angry with you'; it is possible to be honest, but not to the point of being abusive; and it is possible to share emotions only because members know intuitively that some emotions must remain hidden. As with many learning environments (virtual or face-to-face), it is the combined emotions and the collective experience of these emotions that shape the possibilities and limitations of learning, and the expectations of how and what should or could be learned.

Anger and anxiety were very much a part of the emotional experience captured by this research. Both of these words come from the same etymological root – the word 'angere', which means to choke. The findings suggest that hidden anxiety chokes and isolates while, in contrast, shared anxieties appear to facilitate individual engagement with the community and also the community itself. Hidden anger chokes oneself and others, restricting the impact of their voice on me and allowing me to be alone in the community with my rage and hatred, to distance myself from others while remaining on edge in the community and on the edge of the community. Hidden anger and anxiety have the same (unconscious) intent in virtual learning communities; they allow separation from others to be maintained in the face of repeated requests on the individual that s/he becomes part of a community.

What does this study tell us about the social dynamics of organizational learning? It suggests that:

- Organizational memory is institutionalised in a rather distinctive way online.
- Contrasting emotions are integral to the social dynamics of learning (shared and hidden is a good description of the emotional dynamics of the organization of learning online)

- The role of facilitator brings questions of control to the surface, in ways that represent this particular type of learning environment (there is an imagined need for greater sensitivity to others in the online environment).
- Interpretation (and the authority one gives or takes to interpret) is integral to the generation of learning in a VLC and a key element of fears concerning the destruction of learning.

**(Still to do:** Each of the points above to be developed in more detail and linked back to the framing literature in order to specify what the study has contributed).

The study illustrates the complexity of emotional dynamics present in VLCs and it reveals the ways in which emotions are manifested in particular communities. The study does not explore the potential relationships between these emotions and learning in a VLC. How do the ways in which emotions are manifested and managed in a VLC have an impact on individual and group learning processes? The interviews all took place at the end of the life of the communities and so students and facilitators were discussing their memories of emotions during their VLC experiences. It would be useful to explore the emotions of community members as they are actively involved in the communities and to obtain a more detailed picture of the emotional dynamics as they are occurring. This would help to generate a rich picture of the emotional dynamics in and beyond a VLC.

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