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Can Virtual Teacher Communities be a Reality?

Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the effects of online communication on social connectivity and the development of community, as specifically related to teacher communities. I will begin by discussing differing constructions and aspects of the concept of community and the important role of connectivity in the development of community. I will then discuss modern technologies in the realm of CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication), the foundations of these technologies as actual tools for collaboration and community, and the role these technologies play in developing connectedness in communities. I will then draw out characteristics and value in virtual community interaction and its relationship to "real" or offline community as it exists. Identity, cultural and language issues will be discussed as they relate to online communities. I will then focus on the implications that flow from this for the development of a teacher community through online communication. Finally I will analyze two threads to illustrate some of the themes discussed above.

Introduction

Our society has experienced changes in community structure in the last twenty five to thirty years - specifically in the areas of participation in and formation of community groups. This alteration in structure is clearly seen in the traditional community - geographically driven and homogeneously based - as there is a notable decline of community level participation (as noted by Putnam, 2000) but also in the world of the virtual community where identity is unimportant or constructed and community is based on at least one common qualifier. Social capital - as defined by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman - takes on a new shape in the new media. With the daily advent of new technologies - from the standard Internet of the early nineties to the multimedia revolution of the late nineties to the wireless connection of the early twenty-first century, the social world is barely able to stay caught up (truly, by the completion of this paper, likely there will exist new technologies hardly conceived).

The same is true in our educational community where teachers - under the great pressure being exerted by public and government forces alike - are more preponderant to share techniques and valuable pedagogical methods. The

sharing of these ideas and methods is limited by the traditional restrictions of more common community structures. Therefore, new creative and unusual avenues of community formation are necessary for teachers to participate in these activities. Enter the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). The limitations of proximity and geography are no longer relevant. Online communication - asynchronous and synchronous - arrives in schools and homes alike. The concept of social capital warps as a result to disregard previously important factors to establish community - as geography, proximity and identity are eliminated to allow for an altogether different form of community.

In this paper, I will be focusing on the implications of social capital on teacher communities in online settings. I'm less concerned with the benefits of social capital - as defined by Bourdieu and Campbell (Halsey et al, 1997) - related to indirect economic benefits and networking for collective economic gain and more concerned with the *connectedness* aspects. This will allow me to examine in depth the effects of online technologies on teacher community formations - less with economic gains and more with pedagogical ones. The economic aspects of online teacher defined social capital I will leave for another venture.

To establish an understanding of what is possible with online teacher communities, we must have an understanding of the progression of the online technological world in the past three to four decades. I will not take the time to provide in detail historical benchmarks for the development of the Internet and its accompanying technologies, for that is an essay unto itself. I will rather merely provide the main milestones for this face of the Informational Revolution (Putnam, 2000).

Community Formations

Definitions and Distinctions

As the 1998 edition of the *Dictionary of Sociology* notes concerning community, "the concept of community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common - usually a common sense of identity." It further states that the notion of community represents "a wide ranging relationship of solidarity over a rather undefined area of life and interests" (Marshall, 1998). Community really can be considered a relationship between identity and the formed relationships with that identity.

But, the *Dictionary* admits that the actual agreed-upon definition is non-existent at this point. There is no clear and accepted definition "of just what characteristic features of social interaction constitute the solidaristic relations typical of so-called communities" (Marshall, 1998). Robin Hamman notes, "much of the terminological ambiguity surrounding the definition of the term "community" within

the social sciences is that the very social construct which it seeks to describe is continually changing and evolving" (Hamman, 2002).

George Hillery undertook the daunting task of reviewing the literature concerning sociologists and definitions of community. In this process he identified ninety-odd reported characteristics of community - eventually narrowing them down to a unique sixteen. He notes (in his *Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement* in Rural Sociology, 1955) that "there is one element, however, which can be found in all of the concepts . . . all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement (Marshall, 1998)."

The distinction between community and society (important in this essay) is made through the sociological terms Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft . The former denotes community - focusing on relationships based on family and close face-to-face ties. There exists an attachment to place, concern over ascribed social status, and elements of homogeneity and a regulated community. The latter - Gesellschaft - refers to society and general association - denoting the concepts of urbanism, industrial life, mobility, heterogeneity, impersonality (Marshall, 1998).

We are most concerned - in the context of online relationships and community - with the elements of *Gemeinschaft* - closeness, regulation, homogeneity - and individual, interpersonally-based identity formation. Putnam sums up the concept of community as basically a *social group* (Putnam, 2000). We will explore this notion of social groups (the gemeinschaft) by looking at how groups are formed and interact.

Enter the Third Place

Oldenburg, in *the Great Good Place* - describes the problem of place in America as manifesting in "a sorely deficient informal public life." He argues that America must revitalize its informal connections - dubbed "The Third Place" - a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work." This Third Place is community - the informal connection among individuals on personal common interests and issues. Home and Work are the first two "places," according to Oldenburg. What proves to be the most interesting with Oldenburg's review of the decline of community is his description of the Third Place.

This description includes the following characteristics:

- ◊ *Escape/ time-out from daily duties* - but this is a limiting descriptor of the third place as it is really a reaction to possibly the other two places
- ◊ *Neutral ground* - sociability in the third place depends on the ease of entering and departing thus making it easier for people to "not be in each other's hair"

- ◊ *"Leveler"* - the third place is notorious for making everyone equal - inclusive in nature. There are no formal criteria for admission or membership and it allows colleagues to get to know each other on a more personal level
- ◊ *Conversation is the primary activity*
- ◊ *Accessibility/ Accommodation* - Philip Slater states that, "(a) community life exists when one can go daily to a given location and see many of the people he knows." The third place must be geographically convenient.
- ◊ *Regulars* - this identifies people as fellow customers. In order to become a regular at the third place, the stranger must establish trust among the inhabitants.
- ◊ *Low Profile* - the third place is plain in appearance - possibly older. Newer places are often built for other purposes.
- ◊ *Mood is Playful*
- ◊ *Home Away from Home* - using the third definition of "home" in Webster's, the third place is a congenial environment (Oldenburg, 1997).

These aspects are implied to be unique to the Third Place. Our Home and Work places are thus void of these impersonal and informal characteristics – escapism, neutrality, playfulness, conversational, community-feel. Oldenburg sums up that "(t)hird places that render the best and fullest services are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurances that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg, 1997). The Third Place is the home away from home – the place where we know we are accepted, feel comfortable, and interact informally with those we care about.

The Third Place is quite relevant to our study of community-mindedness and connective-ness in the sense of comfort and informal connections. Another relatively recent concept in the realm of community is the concepts surrounded in Social Capital – focusing on beneficial relationships (mutual and singular).

Social Capital

Social Capital has been defined (by Robert Putnam more recently) as 'features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995). We as individuals and as groups desire interaction with one another for specific benefits. These benefits can be economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, physical or even educational. Social capital theorists have examined this from several varying facets.

James Campbell takes a very practical approach to the use and existence of social capital in our society. His focus is on the micro-economics of social capital and its effects on human capital. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's propositions, Campbell explores the use of social capital in small-scale community contexts - like in neighborhoods and families. He argues that the use of social capital is for the betterment or the advancement of the individual (exchanges of favors;

bringing something to the relationship with the expectation of getting something out of the relationship) (Halsey et al, 2001)

The informal third place becomes very important in the light of social capital. This takes the concepts proposed under Oldenburg further. The benefits are not merely confined to our list of characteristics (escapism, neutrality, playfulness, conversational, community-feel , etc) but rather may directly rely upon more social advancement-related reasons. We need personal interaction, that indirectly or directly has positive effects on our development. We gather valuable tools, form valuable relationships and establish long-lasting relationships to our benefit (short-term and long-term).

Talja Blokland found that those less advantaged socially can glean much from the "urban elite" provided there exist "informal rather than institutional relationships" that success also depends on "specific characteristics of reciprocity and mutuality of neighborhood networks across race and class" (Blokland, 2002). So here enters our advanced definition of the Third Place again - the informal gathering for the betterment of self.

We live in a challenging time when it comes to informal connectedness. The last twenty-five years of the twentieth century saw a change in community - moving more towards individualism from the close-nit community nature of the first quarter of the twentieth-century. Putnam sees the great influence of the Baby Boomer generation as changing the way we interact. Suddenly we have a debate of which came first- the chicken or the egg. In this case - the decline in community and subsequent use of technology or the use of technology in lieu of more traditional means of connecting with others causing a decline in community and thus civic participation. This issue has a great effect on our exploration in this paper as the question really arises as to whether we can experience connectedness - the macher/ formal or schmoozer/ informal types as Putnam describes - in a seemingly disconnected environment (Putnam, 2000).

But, as Lerner notes and Oldenburg reiterates, there still exists a "Problem of Place in America" where the small town (informal) cannot be revitalized, so a new community structure must evolve to take on integrated community needs in our "quest for community" (Lerner, 1957).

We have established concepts surrounding community, community formations and the relationship to a “Third Place (as defined by Oldenburg) and Social Capital (as defined by Putnam and Campbell). We now turn to the complex medium for which we can now communicate and form relationships regardless of geographical boundaries.

The Internet: History and Collaboration

> "The Internet has revolutionized the computer and communications world like nothing before. The invention of the telegraph, telephone, radio, and computer set the stage for this unprecedented integration of capabilities. The Internet is at once a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location." (Leiner et al, 2003)

In the span of four decades, the Internet has traveled from a research collaboration tool among specific elite universities to a world-wide integral part of first world commerce. Due to the Sputnik event in 1957, the United States formed ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) under the Department of Defense. This agency's purpose was to progress the US's leadership in science and military-related technology.

The research teams established four host computers as part of the ARPANET (the Internet at infancy) in 1969. These resided in UCLA, University of Utah, UC Berkley, and Stanford. The first message (in the form of "packets") sent on October 29, 1969 consisted of a "L" and an "O" (the system crashed when "G" was entered in an attempt to complete the word LOGIN). Regardless, the test proved successful. Further expansion of the project and increased participation ensued.

Throughout the seventies and eighties, ARPANET expanded, transformed and morphed into a web of networks connected as a community of host computers. Much of the activity on these networks focused on academic research and government related activities. Then, in the latter half of the eighties, rogue networks tapped into the power of networking - as an offshoot of sixties radicalism and free access - and began making their foot hold in the form of virtual communities. These free nets (as some were termed) allowed many participants free (or near free) access via modem technology to communities of *subscribers* and shared community-related information. Howard Rheigold describes one of these dubbed remotely-based connected societies in his book *Virtual Community.* (Rheingold, 1994).

More networks form (from three in the 1970s to some 50,000 in the mid-1990s).

> "Thus, by 1985, Internet was already well established as a technology supporting a broad community of researchers and developers, and was beginning to be used by other communities for daily computer communications. Electronic mail was being used broadly across several communities, often with different systems, but interconnection between different mail systems was demonstrating the utility of broad based electronic communications between people." (Leiner et al, 2003)

The 90s proved to be ripe for the provision of national and global access using this foundational technology.

The communities of the late eighties and the early nineties began to grow and the common "consumer" found the online world to be useful. 1991 saw the release of the WWW (World Wide Web) and other technologies that created the framework (and some that are still being used today like PGP) for Internet growth of accessibility (an early issue addressed by the free net movements). In 1993, a web browser called Mosaic was introduced, contributing to an increase in annual online traffic by some 341,634%.

In short, the Internet (and related computer-mediated communications technologies) grew at exponential rates - especially in the 1990s. These technologies began as portals for community-based communication (primarily academic and military) and continue at a more vernacular scale today - allowing for the *common man* (or woman) to be connected to the others globally and intimately at the same time.

> "The Internet is as much a collection of communities as a collection of technologies, and its success is largely attributable to both satisfying basic community needs as well as utilizing the community in an effective way to push the infrastructure forward. This community spirit has a long history beginning with the early ARPANET." (Leiner et al, 2003)

What really proves interesting is the collaborative community that has emerged to address Internet-related sociological and technical issues. This community includes many of quite different backgrounds.

What does the future of the Internet hold for us? As Leiner, et al tell us,

> "one should not conclude that the Internet has now finished changing. The Internet, although a network in name and geography, is a creature of the computer, not the traditional network of the telephone or television industry. It will, indeed it must, continue to change and evolve at the speed of the computer industry if it is to remain relevant." (Leiner et al, 2003)

Suffice it to say, the technologies surrounding the Internet and CMC should only continue to exponentially increase in complexity and accessibility. What was in existence for the few now is distributed world-wide (through developed nations). Out of necessity, smaller groups of individuals will "connect" to keep hold of identity in this macrocosmic technological virtual world.

The technological foundation has been established to scale out a global community of extensive proportions. Naturally community – and community-building tools – would grow out of this global technological foundation. And so it has.

Current Community-Building Technologies, An Overview

In the following section, we will review the various technologies in existence (again, I must caveat that we can only report on what currently exists but as the reader reviews this paper, these technologies may have become quite outdated). The ones briefly described are all communication oriented technologies meant to connect two or more people together - regardless of relationship geographically or socially.

News Groups
News groups are areas for users to post text-based messages, images, or files against a specific topic or range of topics. The area is merely a listing of links to created documents with the poster and the time it was posted. The postings are organized in a reverse-chronological sorting. News Groups are often organized around celebrities (fans), types of games, hobbies, movies, television shows, topics of interest and shared views.

Certainly, the implications of using News Groups for connecting people should prove to be quite clear. The area of interest can be created for users to post against and examples of integration, ideas, comments, complaints, discussions and concerns can be easily gathered from this well of data storage. News Groups can be monitored twenty-four hours a day.

Any users can post against any News Groups provided his/her Internet service provider has allowed access to that News Group.

List Servs
List Servs – as similar to News Groups – function around a specific topic or range of topics. Users subscribe to a list based on a specific topic or interest. Once subscribed, users receive emails from others in the group. Each time a participant responds, all subscribers in the group receive the email response. The discussion is basically emailed to the entire group – as if everyone was sitting in the same room listening and contributing.

Chat Groups
Bowker notes that "users of IRC treat the medium as a virtual reality of virtual freedom, in which participants feel free to act out their fantasies, to challenge social norms, and exercise aspects of their personality that would under normal circumstances be inhibited (Bowker, 2002)." Chat rooms allow the free expression and discussion of individuals. User must download a Chat Client Software in order to participate. Discussion occurs in real time – obviously across cultural and geographical boundaries. The only limitation to the Chat is the technological limitation of the user and possibly language barriers (international or cyber-based).

VEs and MUDs

More complex and advanced technologies have sprung up in the past few years - specifically surrounding the use of Virtual Environments (VE). These are as they are described where a user literally travels from virtual room to virtual room. The complexity comes in with the advances of multimedia integrated with the communication software. MUDS (Multi-User Dungeons) exist in relation to role-p;laying software designed for online collaboration or competition. The world of Dungeons and Dragons has inspired the creation of these chat-like communities where languages and identities are created - thus creating communities.

These tools bring about connectedness among participants. We have established the basic needs of community formation – as the Third Place for informal interaction – and the beneficial potential of its formation – as Social Capital is freely exchanged among participants. Now that we have laid the technological groundwork for online community interaction, we will now examine the forms these communities take - as virtual communities.

Virtual Communities or Real Communities in Virtual Environments

> "Technology doesn't 'act' in itself, neither are the people willingless objects, but much more creators and social actors which employ the technology according to their needs" (Zurawski, 2002).

The past two decades have seen great advances in technology, bringing a globalization to community like never seen before. Concerns have arisen over the direction of community with - especially - the advent of the Internet. The Informational Revolution is upon us (see Putnam, 2000). So how effective can virtual environments be in helping to establish or progress community (the notion of informal connectedness)?

Manuel Castells notes that the technological innovations that brought about the Internet and virtual networking (also see the "The internet: History and Collaboration" section above) were conceived to solve a problem concerning connecting individuals. For example, Ward Christensen and Randy Suess' invention of the modem to share information through Chicago's harsh winter; UseNet's News service rise (at Duke University and at UNC) to meet the needs of community/ online computer discussion among students and BBS (Bulletin Board Services) focus on allowing the posting of messages by members of various communities addressed needs of connectiveness. More recent examples are Virtual Environments (VE) like Sony's experiments with a large scale, shared virtual environment suitable for use in the Internet demonstrate that. The key focus of the project is an open environment, suited to supporting large numbers of participants in a highly interactive environment (Yoshiaki, 1996)

Characteristics of Virtual Communities

Virtual communities as Manuel Castells defines them are "like Howard Rheingold('s) - self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself." He notes that virtual communities may be formalized systems (like BBS or hosted conferences) or be spontaneously formed (like around interest groups or events). In either case, the communities are ephemeral from the point of view of the participants - where users can move in and out as necessary (as interests or expectations change). (Castells, 1996).

He notes that the virtual community participants are either "electronic villagers" or homesteaders" or that they act as a "transient crowd for whom their casual incursions into various networks is tantamount to exploring several existences under the mode of ephemeral" (Castells, 1996). Ward further reinforces this view.

> I suggest that the online community has two main characteristics. Through its convergence with the physical, the online community's existence is apparent, though not unconditionally virtual. Indeed, the online community does not compete with, or supersede physical space, rather a hybrid space emerges that is neither absolutely physical or virtual. Secondly, I depict the participants as having a transitory, unconditional relationship with the online community. That is; they will only participate for short periods when they require use of the resources that the online community has to offer (Ward, 2002)

What is unusual about CMC in general and traditionally virtual communities specifically, is there exists a many-to-many relationship (Castells, 1996). This provides for many touch points for interests and individualism.

Virtual Reality

> The distinction between 'virtual' community and 'real' community is unwarranted. The term 'virtual' means something akin to 'unreal'. ... My experience has been that people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but the participants in the online communities see them as quite real (Stubbs, 1998)

I recently participated in a discussion with an academically inclined individual where I was instructed that community online is really a virtual communication arena - quite different from the real world - and unable to sustain real community. In order for a community to exist, I was told, there must be face-to-face interaction. Hopefully evidence outlined above and below will provide an alternate way of looking at this concept.

Manuel Castells notes that "CMC is constructed not around virtual reality but rather real virtuality" or the experiencing of reality through virtual - or perceived - communication (Castells, 1996). The communication remains real and the participants remain real. What is altered is the method of communication. What is hoped for is that the content - as a result of the communication method - is not altered. The naturally developed adaptation for this concern is discussed below, surrounding the use of emoticons, etc.

Castells continues by stating that "all realities are communicated through symbols" - that is what we say face-to-face; what we display through non-verbal communication; general communication all use a body of symbols for communication. CMC is a typographically and multimedia-based method of communication and all resulting language is rich with the use of symbols. He further reports that "(CMC) is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/ symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become experience" (Castells, 1996). If virtual communicates can exist and sustain community as real, then what can be said of the relationship between virtual communities and offline communities?

Some have argued that the virtual detracts from the "real"/ offline one. In his study on AOL users in the effect of online interaction on the maintenance of offline communities, Robin Hamman notes that "online communication . . . does not take the place of, or diminish the occurrence of, offline interaction for my participants. Cyberspace is not merely a simulation of the "real" world, it is part of the "real" world. Our activities in cyberspace do not supplant the "real" world, but are supplemental to it. Going online is an activity which is beneficial to both the individual and their pre-existing, privatized network community. In fact, for many users, computer mediated communication is necessary for the continued maintenance of pre-existing social networks." He further notes that "communities continue to exist, but are supported through a number of technologies including the printed word, transportation, and new communications technologies (Hamman, 2002)." The online community becomes another method (a necessary one in some cases) to maintain connectedness with others in pre-existing defined social networks and off-line communities. Hamman, confirming this, concludes that individuals in his study used online communication methods "to communicate with others within their pre-existing offline communities (Hamman, 2002)"

Rheingold, like Hamman, has suggested that virtual interactions and relations overlap in to the real/ physical lives of those participating. Face-to-face meetings were common among Rheingold's compatriots in the eighties - spending their evenings sharing information and experiences in online environments and some weekends gathering for picnics to see who actually was the individual behind the virtual identity (Rheingold, 1994).

Some studies show that over half of participants in newsgroup discussions not only begin long-lasting relationships in online environments but also continue off-line relationships with these online friends. Other avenues of communication are employed - postal service and telephone - and over time these develop into long-lasting personal interactive relationships. Social bonds become redefined. Thomsen sums up that newsgroup relationships 'typically serve as catalysts for long-term and meaningful relationships'(Thomsen et al, 1998).

Furthermore, evidence is proving that physical co-presence is not necessary for "intimate quality interactions"(Thomsen et al, 1998). Thank goodness as he also notes - as do Steven Jones, Ray Oldenburg and Howard Rheingold, that the various CMC technologies "have sprung out of the need to re-create this sense of community, that participants join and become involved with the express purpose of reestablishing social bonds.(Thomsen et al, 1998)." Suddenly virtual communities become Oldenburg's "third place."

Hamman discovered, in a brief analysis of a discussion he personally had with a woman he called Sarah online, that many of the topics so taboo and sensitive were actually discussed more freely in this virtual environment. As Sarah's identity - with the exception of her first name - were basically hidden, Sarah discussed very personal feelings about her divorce - likely too uncomfortable to discuss in a "real" and physical location (Hamman, 1996). Identity becomes very important in the existence and the study of the online world.

> "Although they transcend the physical and spatial boundaries that have traditionally defined a 'community,' 'cyber-communities' are often a primary form of social interaction for the growing number of individuals who often spend hours each day surfing the net." (Thomsen et al, 1998)

The cyber-community becomes the connection to the real world for the web-surfer. The gravest of subjects becomes a real exploration using online community tools to interact with other real participants through virtual communication lines.

Identity, Language, and Culture

> "For one who has led a less than exuberant social life, internet chat can be exhilarating. In the first month on-line, I met more people then I had in 39 years of real life (i.e. non-computer-mediated) existence. This is something that takes some getting used to, the sheer vastness and vitality of the chat scene. It can only be compared to a gigantic party with tens of thousands of rooms; a party that never stops, that includes people from all over the world, that is totally safe and non-threatening, that lets you put on any disguise, be any age or gender or appearance, and talk in half a dozen rooms simultaneously."(Cyberrdewd, 2002)

What becomes very interesting in the development of virtual communities is the notion of cultural identity and individual expression. Cyberrdewd – above – notes that online communication (in this case online chat) is “exhilarating” and that it is like a huge party where you can be whoever you want to be. Communication is quite individualized and demonstrates the birth of culture online - quite unlike and unrelated to any culture existing offline. What is acceptable socially offline might become quite unacceptable or inappropriate online. What is quite natural online can be very much unacceptable offline. The limits of social acceptance are pushed in virtually built communities (Bowker, 2001).

Social meaning is created online - in reference to individual identity and in reference to societal interaction. Baym recorded interactions among soap opera enthusiasts in online chat and discussion areas. She notes that there was building humor among participants (where previous understood notions are necessary for understanding and acceptance) and a building of "group solidarity" (Baym, 2002). This became part of their social identity.

> "people use the Internet, because of its excellence to discuss issues that affect their day to day lives and maybe organize along identities or lines of interest" (Zurawski, 2002)

Interests and identity appear to be the glue that holds virtual communities together. Unlike geographic proximity, familial relations or "friends of a friend" scenarios, virtual communities can be solely built on a common interest point (like soap operas) and how the use fits into the identity of that group. Adolescent girls can discuss interests in boys in a safe and a somewhat anonymous environment (Smyres, 2002). Seniors are using chat rooms more and more to discuss issues important and very relevant to them (Philbeck, 2002).

> "One thing I have found especially fascinating is the way that CyberSpace communities have all the characteristics of a real flesh and blood PhysicalSpace community. There is the same sense of community, and also the same exclusion of outsiders. In general, what happens is that people settle down in a group and a chat format they feel comfortable with, or have managed to establish themselves in, and then log on primarily to that group. In this way they establish an on-line circle of friends, who quickly become just as real and close and familiar as "real life" friends."(Cyberrdewd, 2002)

An example of group formation on interests is the TrAce community. TrAce was financed by the Arts Council of England to provide a means for the literary community to "flourish and grow." The organization offers a "virtual space to discuss, workshop, and debate." The group refers to itself as an ‘Interactive assembly’ and an "online community" (Thomas, 2002). What TrAce claims is unique about their formation is not that the interest group flocked to the newly

created interest virtual location, but rather that the community already existed and needed a virtual location to reside (Thomas, 2002). Again, a great connection between online interaction and offline living.

But as noted above, on-line isn't necessarily completely separate from off-line life. Hine notes the World Wide Web "demonstrates that the boundary between off-line and on-line is constructed through the actions of the participants." But as to relations to culture, Hine notes that "it is possible to see the Internet as a culture is its own right, but that culture is tied in by complex connections to off-line life. When closely tied to off-line life, the Internet is used as a transparent communications medium" (Hine, 1998). On-line and off-line must remain together in analysis.

Of course the examination of cultural formation cannot be performed without mention of language development. The online dialect takes on many interesting forms in the various communication technology fields.

The challenge in a purely textual and remote communication arena is the lost non-verbal cues in standard communication. Of, course the raising of an eyebrow can completely alter communicative meaning, thus context is everything. The non-verbal context, or cues, must be supplied textually to accommodate for this absence.

Metz describes a few of these practices in the written word:

1. there is the common practice of simply verbalizing physical cues. For example, a humorous comment is difficult to reply in genuine laughter, so the literal typing of "hehehe" is considered acceptable.
2. physical actions taken by CMC users are typically described within two asterisks. This form of expression usually is determined within the context of the communication, however, and is primarily utilized in on-line interactive situations, such as Relay and MUDs. (Metz, 1994).

She provides an example of this simple practice:

> <MaidMarion> *Lady Marion arrives in the room with a flair and arrogance fitting of her status*
> <Lancelot> *Bowing low in respect to Lady Marion's presence* How fair thee, Lady Marion? (Metz, 1994).

Another example of the use of textual emphasis to demonstrate what would be vocal emphasis can be found in this example:

> ... and I find it ludicrous that some system administrators would have the utter *gall* to censor material to a public forum. Such behavior is unethical, immoral, and I _won't_ stand for it.

> Here, the terms 'gall' and 'won't' are to be represented as stressed for emphasis to compensate for the lack of vocal ability (Metz, 1994).

In this fashion non-verbal cues become quite verbal.

Metz describes another form of "visual expressive content" includes the use of capitals or other common typing techniques to emphasize. Often, all capitals indicate yelling or extreme emphasis. The below exchange demonstrates this:

> <2hot4U> HEY EVERYBODY, WHAT'S UP?!?
> <Maurice> 2hot: Why are you yelling?
> <Bear> 2hot: Quit yelling! You're giving me a headache!
> <2hot4U> Sorry everybody, my caps lock stuck. (Metz, 1994).

Other methods of non-verbal communication include the use of "emoticons." These quickly display mood and are often included at the end of a communication.

:-) or :)	smile
;-) or ;)	wink
:-)) or :))	laugh or big smile
:))))))))))	very happy
:-(or :(	frown or unhappy
:(((((((((((	very unhappy
:-/ or :-| or :/ or :|	perplexed
:~(	sad (tears)
:~~(	very sad

(Cyberdewd, 2002)

The use of these emoticons also combat the lack of non-verbal cues being present in the communication episode (Wood and Smith, 2001).

The issue here is that non-verbal cues being written to describe action are filtered through self-perception. I – should I have said something inappropriate – might not care to describe my physically-obvious embarrassment at my comments. Thus, I report only what I want to portray to my fellow online community participants – thus leaving out important visual cues for understanding and interaction (adding meaning and context to text).

Simple accommodations made by the online community demonstrate a language development (of sorts) where communities can be quite inclusive and quite exclusive. More complex language development is noted below in the form of abbreviation. This style of communication grew out of necessity to accommodate for the need for quick responses in textual environments. I have included a short glossary provided by a chat user known as Cyberdewd. He notes that these are

the more common words and are more common in Chat environments. I can attest personally to these showing up in other virtual communication arenas.

- ◊ a/s/l - age - sex - location? (a standard introductory inquiry)
- ◊ bbl - be back later
- ◊ bbs - be back soon
- ◊ brb - be right back
- ◊ cya - see you
- ◊ j/k - joke
- ◊ k - okay
- ◊ lol - laugh out loud
- ◊ np - no problem
- ◊ ppl - people
- ◊ puter - computer
- ◊ rofl - roll on floor laughing
- ◊ roflmao - roll on floor laughing my arse off
- ◊ wb - welcome back
- ◊ 4 - for
- ◊ i c - I see
- ◊ l8r - (see you) later
- ◊ r - are
- ◊ RL - real-life
- ◊ sup - what's up?
- ◊ u - you
- ◊ y - why?

(Cyberdewd, 2002)

While textual cues and an online dialect have developed, meaning can still be easily misconstrued. As Robin Hamman notes that "gross misinterpretations of language can occur quite easily within the limited cues narrow bandwidth environment " (Hamman, 2002). His own experiences in data gathering for research from one subject embarrassingly demonstrate his own misunderstanding of cues and her intentions online.

> The narrow-bandwidth of the computer medium caused me to make gross misinterpretations of Rebecca's words and intentions because important information was missing from our communication. I had replaced the missing information with my own idealized version of events and meanings, leading me to believe that Rebecca had propositioned me (Hamman, 2002).

This adaptation of communication style to specific environments is known as a social context cues theory (Wood and Smith, 2001). Over time, the evolution of the language and acceptable behaviors in online cultures becomes more

complex and standardized, as more and more participants understand the expectations.

> "Although the server as a whole does lay down certain guidelines, for the most part rules are determined by the senior channel-operator, and hence constitute the rules or guideline for that room.(Cyberrdewd, 2002)"

Rules, or expectation of behavior and interaction, are dictated by the participants. If individuals would like to play, they have to play by the rules everyone has set up. Here is a sample list of rules for a chat environment:

1. no flooding.
2. no fighting..
3. no advertising...
4. no op begging...
5. be friendly and considerate and have fun...
6. no permanent ops added without a higher ops consent!

(Cyberrdewd, 2002)

Each environment has its own set of rules and it is dependent upon the participants, the purpose in the founding of the group and the interest topic that the group is centered upon. For example, Christian-based groups would be concerned about language and content that is offensive to their standards whereas a group founded on anarchical principles would likely be less concerned about such regulations and might not even have regulations at all.

Thus, we have established that online communities use complex language practices (with at least a minimal non-verbal cue expression) and rules and expectations to establish interaction and relationships among participants.

Offline verses Online Community

The online community world differs greatly from the offline in that these methods of communication and interaction allow for full communication among participants – body language and other non-verbal cues included. What would be interesting to further research would be an examination of the effectiveness of textual descriptiveness of physical status as opposed to actual visual evaluation of intended (or unintended) non-verbal cues of face-to-face participants. As the online participant clearly states intent, would this be more effective than possible misinterpretations of mood, etc between two silent participants?

Other differences - as outlined above – involve geographical and logistical constraints. What is beneficial to the offline world is the fact that those of different backgrounds and geographical separation can arrive in the same communication sphere – in anonymity – to discuss on the same level and share in an informal relationship.

The offline world carries with it issues of social stratification. Our common separations among social levels exist – even in our Third Places – and provide for gaps in communication (and thus any hope of community). But the online world eliminates any social levels (again in anonymity and identity alteration and development as discussed above) so that all function on the same level.

The gathering of a community of participants around specific subjects and topics is much more prevalent in the online virtual space. Communities are often solely formed on the basis of a topic of pop-culture, politics, religious inclination or recreational interest. In contrast, offline/ real communities exist often due to geographical and convenient logistical factors. While topics of interest are also important in the off-line arena, the issue of logistics (as discussed above) has to remain a factor in formation and development.

A to Z Teacher Stuff: A Virtual Community for Teachers

> "Communities continue to exist, but are supported through a number of technologies including the printed word, transportation, and new communications technologies. CMC is just one of the many technologies used by people within existing network communities to communicate, and thus to maintain those community ties over distance." (Hamman, 2002)

To illustrate the viability of online community formation and development – especially in the sense of teacher communities – we turn to one of existing teacher communities online. Located in the appendices of this paper are three sections which I will describe below. I extracted this data from www.atozteacherstuff.com - a site designed to be a stopping community point for teachers internationally.

The site itself - as of June 20, 2003 - has had 6,677 total posts in the total six forum areas (or interest-based locations). It should be noted that the most popular area for posting proved to be the Early Childhood Education. This term in the USA usually refers to anywhere from pre-school (aged four) to around grade four or five (aged ten or eleven). The general data associated with these areas are located in Appendix A.

I have extracted data from two "threads" (established topic discussions which users can post against). Both threads prove to be informal in nature, one as a professional topic/ subject (Appendix B) and one as personal (Appendix C). I observed the conversation in the personal discussion and participated in the professional discussion.

The professional discussion began with the initial question of the pronunciation of character names in Chenua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* but evolved into a discussion of the importance of correct pronunciation when reading with children. It should be noted that many of the participants posting in reference to the debate portion of the discussion chose to remain anonymous by not being logged in when posting - thus posting as "Guest." Any user can post as a Guest regardless of whether an identity has been registered. The bulk of the discussion occurred between the initial posting of the question by Teachenglish2 on April 10 and the last posting of the unregistered user (noted as Unregistered5) on April 15. I posted under the identity of techedguy on April 24th in hopes that her initial question might still need answering.

This forum discussion remained at nearly an anonymous level (with the exception of the initial poster, myself and one other participant). Any controversial or antagonistic opinions were posted in anonymity. I, myself, felt comfortable posting my response as registered under my newly created identity as I was not posting against anyone's seemingly strongly held view. The discussion closes with a simple thank you by Teachenglish2. Maybe we will cross paths again, maybe we will not.

So we can see the elements of an anonymous, topic-centered discussion. While the future of a strongly-formed community deriving from this online exchange is unlikely, several of the semi-anonymous participants (the ones who had identifiable identities – albeit totally created online) might use these topic discussions as a springboard in other discussion areas. Elements of social capital – in the sense of some benefits – can be extracted from this discussion. Certainly the initial query was answered providing benefit to the initial poster.

As to the other forum thread - the personal discussion - the participants, in contrast to the other forum thread example, maintained identities openly. No unregistered users posted here. The discussion primarily took place between SpecialPreskoo (a newly engaged teacher), Amanda, Tara19 and mommaruthie. Others chimed in. The topic prompting the discussion was SpecialPreskoo's experience of being proposed to by her boyfriend. What ensues is a virtual hair salon discussion of how, where, why and what is next. It appears that the users are vicariously living their fantasies out through SpecialPreskoo - with regard to wedding ceremony type and honeymoon destination. The discussion takes place from April 15th to April 20th. The message postings are much more involved and wordy. There is excitement (note the use of some of our online-specific language). The conversation is less informational and more personal and warm.

There is an element of the Third Place here. One feels like he or she has walked into a casual discussion where participants feel at home – a sense of escapism, neutrality, playfulness, conversational in nature, and a feel of community.

What really is interesting here is if you took these two discussions and forced them to be face-to-face oral discussions in a teacher's lounge, the first would be eternally awkward the second would be very believable.

The limitations in the personal discussion of engagements, weddings and honeymoons is primarily limited by the asynchronous nature of the discussion. One cannot easily see a progression of the discussion, but the talking points and content is not necessarily altered by this. The personal nature of these discussions is no less apparent due to its textuality. The personalness of the professional discussion would be as cold in a "real" environment, and actually would likely not occur.

While I realistically recognize that these discussions are not necessarily representative of all discussions among educators online - I don't pretend that this is the purpose of this essay - I do recognize the practical benefits to a virtual community discussion evidenced in these examples. Herein lies social capital. Debate and discourse can be exchanged freely in slight to extreme anonymity. Ideas that would be offensive or taken personally in person can be expressed in these virtual environments. Community building is evidenced by at least some familiarity among the personal thread participants. Interests, concern, empathy, genuine happiness - all evidence of connectedness.

The virtual teacher's lounge is a reality. Individual educators exchanging, supporting, sharing, informing, empathizing in a virtual room. Others challenging and debating subjects. These spur on creative thought and encourage growth. Here we have the Third Place - the great informal virtual meeting room.

Conclusions, Applications, The Future

Millarch tells us - even five years ago - that "the Internet will change human society irreversibly, but at the end it is just another tool. Will the changes be good or bad? The answer is both" (Millarch, 1998). We must look at this great tool as a means of communicating in ways that geography and personal physical connectedness limit us. The techno-realist movement warns us (in the person of the points of its manifesto) against Utopian ideas of communication freedom:

- ◊ Technologies are not neutral.
- ◊ The Internet is revolutionary, but not Utopian.
- ◊ Information is not knowledge.
- ◊ Wiring the schools will not save them.
- ◊ The public owns the airwaves; the public should benefit from their use.
- ◊ Understanding technology should be an essential component of global citizenship (Millarch, 1998)

We cannot claim that CMC and Internet-related technologies can solve the ills of our pedagogical community, but we can argue that virtual communities and non-traditional connectedness address the issues of proximity, time and spatial

limitations. We can argue that these technologies have side benefits to encourage expression and communication.

Virtual communities for teachers can exist as informal (and professional formal) communities for teachers globally to interact in a Third Place. The language development, communication style unique to CMC, and common characteristics of the great Third Place are evidenced in our limited examples above. Teachers can use the online world to gain the needs embodied in the Third Place – replacing the absence of the pubs and coffee houses of decades ago.

Where does this lead us? This leads us to what our educational community (the "real" one) should do. More research needs to be done in the area of educator learning communities and online communication. Schools, institutions and divisions can begin to explore online collaboration and debate. School improvement and effectiveness practitioners and scholars can explore the use of these mediated technologies as means of establishing effective online learning communities, and possibly reinforcing existing offline ones.

More examination needs to be exercised in the actual nature of online communication in direct contrast to offline communities. Further research in the spontaneous formation verses the evolution from existing communities would also provide some insight into its effectiveness.

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Appendices

Appendix A - A to Z Teacher Stuff - Forum Areas

Data gathered on 22 June, 2003

General Education
Description: *Does your topic apply to education in general? No specific grade level? Discuss those ideas and issues here!*
1678 Posts
348 Threads

Early Childhood Education
Description: *Discuss teaching and learning related to the little ones. Toddlers, Preschool, Kindergarten (~ages 0-5)*
1635 Posts
338 Threads

Elementary Education
Description: *Discuss teaching and learning related to grades 1-5 (~ages 6-11)*
2774 Posts
630 Threads

Secondary Education
Description: *Discuss issues related to middle and high school (~ages 12-18)*
148 Posts
67 Threads

NEW! Teacher Time Out
Description: *A.K.A. Other Stuff N Things, Off Topic, Boos and Blahs, URGH :o)*
442 Posts
54 Threads

Appendix B - A to Z Teacher Discussion - Informal/ Professional

Note: Unregistered users (noted as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 below) are just that and are unknown. It is possible that several of these unregistered posts could be from the same persons. I have made no assumptions and have allowed the user posts to remain individualized as there is no clear indication of relationships.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Username	Description	Registered	Total Posts	Posts Here
Teachenglish2	New Member	Apr 2003	5	3
czacza	Veteran Member	Sep 2001	183	1
Unregistered1	Guest	Not Yet	N/A	1
Unregistered2	Guest	Not Yet	N/A	1
Unregistered3	Guest	Not Yet	N/A	1
Unregistered4	Guest	Not Yet	N/A	1
Unregistered5	Guest	Not Yet	N/A	1
techedguy	Hello, I'm new!	Apr 2003	1	1

THE DISCUSSION

Teachenglish2 (04-10-2003 02:43 AM): Prounounciation - Things Fall Apart - Help, I have been all over the Internet trying to find how to pronounce the names of the characters in Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart". Does anyone have ideas, books, or websites that are actually available . . . you can't imagine how many sites are not found or unavailable that I browsed. Please, someone HELP!!!!

czacza (04-11-2003 10:43 PM): Not familiar with the book to which you refer- Why is it important to know how to pronounce the names precisely? I teach my 2nd graders not to get hung up on pronunciation of proper nouns (not to let it slow them down or take time to figure out). Think about yourself as a reader- I know I've read books with ethnic names that I am unfamiliar with (in particular 'Girl with a Pearl Earring- lots of Danish names) As long as you are tracking the characters, traits, elements of story what difference does the pronunciation make? Interesting discussion topic-looking forward to your thoughts....

Unregistered1 (04-12-2003 04:03 AM): quote:----------Originally posted by czacza
Not familiar with the book to which you refer- Why is it important to know how to pronounce the names precisely? I teach my 2nd graders not to get hung up on pronunciation of proper nouns (not to let it slow them down or take time to figure out). Think about yourself as a reader- I know I've read books with ethnic names that I am unfamiliar with (in particular 'Girl with a Pearl Earring- lots of Danish names) As long as you are tracking the characters, traits, elements of story what difference does the pronunciation make? Interesting discussion topic-looking

forward to your thoughts.... ----------

Thanks for your reply. I teach sophomores at a school that is predominately African-American, and my students have been known to tell me that I am pronouncing certain "terms" wrong. I agree that my students should not get hung up on how to pronounce the names, however, it is imperative that they realize that even the most difficult words they can accomplish as readers, once given the correct pronounciation.

Unregistered2 (04-12-2003 04:56 AM): I think that proper pronounciation is important if we are going to discuss literature. Just for fun reading is one thing (I have been known to think of characters by their initials when the names have been tough!), but work-reading is another. It is also good modelling to show that you will go the distance to do things correctly.

The topic might even be an interesting one to discuss with the students, just to get them thinking about proper speech...You might even discuss some of the steps you have taken to figure this out, just to give the kids some ideas when they need them!

Teachenglish2 (04-14-2003 01:57 AM): quote:----------Originally posted by Unregistered
I think that proper pronounciation is important if we are going to discuss literature. Just for fun reading is one thing (I have been known to think of characters by their initials when the names have been tough!), but work-reading is another. It is also good modelling to show that you will go the distance to do things correctly.

The topic might even be an interesting one to discuss with the students, just to get them thinking about proper speech...You might even discuss some of the steps you have taken to figure this out, just to give the kids some ideas when they need them! ----------

Thanks for the advice. I agree, reading for fun is one thing. Call me a perfectionist, I believe in at least presenting my students with pronounciations and then recommending them to abreviate if necessary, so as to not get tongue-tied with the words. Thanks again, I'll have to try that discussion and see what happens.

Unregistered3 (04-14-2003 08:38 AM): It is not being a perfectionist in this instance, it is laying the foundations for proper communication in the future. I think that if kids are taught certain concepts early (like communicating or math reasoning, etc.) they just become second nature. If taught later it becomes much harder to incorporate these lessons into the basic structure of a person. I think that work ethic is one of these things, and that part of a good work ethic is

making an extra effort to see that things are done as correctly as possible (for work projects).

Teaching the importance of proper pronounciation is also a good way to help these kids prevent future embarrassment!

Unregistered4 (04-15-2003 12:29 AM): Proper pronunciation of key vocabulary is one thing- Names is another!!!

Unregistered5 (04-15-2003 02:32 AM): Learning to attempt to find the proper pronouciation of key words (including names) for a discussion is important. It is the same as the first proof-reading skills that these kids are probably learning. Call it proof-reading for speaking, if you will!

techedguy (04-24-2003 07:06 PM): Not sure if you still need it. . . As I remember it - Things Fall Apart was set in Nigeria (its been around 10 years since I read it). Here is a link to language guides in Nigeria.
http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/languages.html. Here's a much more extensive language guide for Swahili which could be helpful in pronunciation - http://www.cis.yale.edu/swahili/sound/pronunce.htm Good luck.

Teachenglish2 (04-24-2003 11:51 PM): quote:----------Originally posted by techedguy
Not sure if you still need it. . . As I remember it - Things Fall Apart was set in Nigeria (its been around 10 years since I read it). Here is a link to language guides in Nigeria.
http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/languages.html
Here's a much more extensive language guide for Swahili which could be helpful in pronunciation - http://www.cis.yale.edu/swahili/sound/pronunce.htm

Good luck. ----------

Thanks a bunch, actually, you were right on time with this information. I just started a few days ago.

Appendix C - A to Z Teacher Discussion - Informal/ Personal

Data gathered on 5/10/2003 12:06 PM

THE PARTICIPANTS

User Name	Description	Registered	Total Posts	Posts Here
SpecialPreskoo	The Links Lady	Jul 2002	328	5
Lanie		Mar 2003	8	1
Amanda	A to Z Owner	Feb 2001	372	4
clarnet73	Veteran Member	Apr 2002	168	1
teacherkasey	Veteran Member	May 2002	185	1
Tara19	Member	Nov 2002	39	2
DizneeTeachR	Member	Mar 2003	23	1
mommaruthie	TeacherChat Addict	May 2002	489	4
Upsadaisy	Moderator	Aug 2002	378	1
AngelaS	TeacherChat Addict	Jul 2002	460	1

THE DISCUSSION

SpecialPreskoo (04-15-2003 02:21 AM): Off Topic... but GUESS WHAT!! Saturday for my birthday, Scott proposed! I said yes of course! I know that was off the topic of education, but I wanted to let my friends on here know! Amanda, you might want to add an OFF TOPIC FORUM for all other DECENT CONVERSATIONS... lol -Lori

Lanie (04-15-2003 03:23 AM): Congratulations!!! Although I am newly registered, I have been to this site a zillion times and I always find your links helpful. This is still an educational topic--getting to know each other better! How exciting for you!!! I wish you the best!

Amanda (04-15-2003 03:41 AM): Congratulations!

clarnet73 (04-15-2003 12:10 PM): congrats, Lori!

Teacherkasey (04-15-2003 10:42 PM): Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!

Tara19 (04-16-2003 12:57 AM)***:*** That is soooo.... awsome! Congrats! I hope u have a PERFECT wedding!!!! Good Luck!!!! ~Tara

DizneeTeachR (04-17-2003 10:24 PM): First of all CONGRATS!!! Second... if you plan on having those little cameras (disposable) and little people (children) make sure you leave a note that this cameras are not to be used as toys... And to turn them in at the end of the wedding... I'm speaking from

experience... When I got back my mom had the film developed for me as you can imagine most were at waste level and lower and we ended up losing almost half of the cameras. Just wanted to warn and inform you. I would hate for that to happen to anyone else because I couldn't wait to see what pics my guests took and was really disappointed. May you have all the happiness in the World!!!

mommaruthie (04-18-2003 04:01 PM)***:*** Mazel Tov! I want to hear if he proposed in a sappy kind of way... Do tell! Ring? Youre so right about an 'off topic from ed' section what could it be called? Harad and Hoorahs Teacher Time out Boos and Blahs or just plain URGH

SpecialPreskoo (04-19-2003 02:09 AM): Call it "OTHER STUFF N THINGS" So Ruth wants details... well... we had been over at my parents for supper. We came back to my place and was watching TV. We got to talking and he was saying how he wants me to be in his life forever... all that sweet mushy stuff... then he gets down on one knee and opens the ring box. I can't say that I was surprised... LOL I saw the square lump in his pocket earlier in the evening..LOL! We've been dating for 2 years now (in Feb.) Back at Christmas, he asked what I wanted for Christmas... I said "You know what I want"... well, apparently he didn't. So, Valentines was coming up.. he asked what I wanted... I said "You know what I want"... he STILL DIDN'T KNOW... SO... my birthday was the next event coming up. He asked me what I wanted... so I said... "A ring!" He repeated "A ring" I said, "Yes, a ring. We've talked about getting married for over a year now. SO, if we are going to get married, then I want a ring". I said nothing else about it since then. About a week later he asked me again what I wanted for my birthday. I said nothing and just glared at him. He said "A CD?" I just kept glaring at him and said nothing. LOL Make him think "CD"!! I gave up on subtle hints. He never catches on to them. Now if I can convince him that I don't want a big wedding... I've had that... I don't want the headache of planning another one and I don't have the money. I'd soon go to Gatlinburg or get married on a cruise ship or something. He hasn't been married before so he wants a church wedding. I don't blame him, but I don't want it. Got any ideas on how to get that taken care of? HELP! -Lori

mommaruthie (04-19-2003 04:01 AM)***:*** DISNEY U can get married at Disney. They have a wedding pavillion. I heard that the tourism industry is taking such a beating in Fl. that you could probably get a date.

Amanda (04-19-2003 05:19 AM)***:*** Hey Lori, I got engaged in the month of March, so I went through the same thing... Christmas passed... nothing... Valentine's Day passed...nothing... but he wanted to surprise me and do it at a more meaningful time... We got engaged on a mountaintop in Colorado exactly five years (YES I HAD TO WAIT 5!!) after we had started dating. The mountain thing was perfect because we had initially gotten together through a ski trip we had taken with some friends. He did manage to surprise me, and even waited until the 3rd day of our trip to propose.. He had to scope out the best place to do

it... It was a less traveled area of the park, and had a beautiful view. Hopefully you can find some sort of compromise... I hated the whole thought of planning a wedding... so I didn't waste a lot of energy on it... After all, it's only going to last a few hours. The marriage is what counts. OH, I'll see what I can do about an off topic forum!

SpecialPreskoo (04-19-2003 05:20 AM): bad idea... I went to Disney World for my honeymoon. I ended up having to PAY FOR MY OWN HONEYMOON... the doofus used his new credit card with $1000 limit on it to buy groom's men gifts and other stuff on it. Well, when it got time to check out and pay, he didn't have enough credit left on his card... so being the nice sweet niave bride I was, I said... oh just put it on my card (I was starting to get embarrassed and really wanted to get out of there). Well, 2 years later and that marriage was over... I wanted my money back for the honeymoon... he wanted the emerald ring he gave me for Valentines day... I said when I get my money, You get your ring... I Love that ring... it STILL looks great on my finger! LOL I did see the wedding pavillion... it is pretty! I wish there was something neat around here that is different for a wedding but not going to take a year to plan or a lot of money either. I'd just love to go on a cruise... get the captain to marry us the first night on the ship... Can they do that? Then when we get back have a reception at his church or something.

mommaruthie (04-19-2003 05:31 AM): cruise Take the entire group you want with you on the cruise. SOOOOO cheap right now. Five dayers for two hundred. SOOOO many cancellations, because of terrorism etc. I would see if there is a ship chaplain (sp?) OH how awesome! I had 250 at mine, mom planned entire thing. Met in sept. Moved intogether in Dec. Engaged on January 1. Married June 18. My husbands wedding band is engraved inside with: to get her forever 6-18-95. The engraver didnt know it was supposed to say together! The wedding was magical and the marriage has been so wonderful. I always say... it just keeps getting better.

Amanda (04-19-2003 07:40 AM)***:*** How do you like the new forum? I also did some rearranging to organize the forums... Let me know if you have any suggestions. Have fun!

Upsadaisy (04-19-2003 03:08 PM) Congratulations, Lori. Hope your journey together is rich and full of joy.

SpecialPreskoo (04-19-2003 04:15 PM)***:*** Cool.... Teacher's Time Out.... I need one of these at school... LOL!! a place to get away from it all.. LOL
Thanks Amanda!
Lori

AngelaS (04-19-2003 08:20 PM):Congrats, Lori!!

Tara19 (04-19-2003 08:38 PM): About the cruise thing.... I just went on a Disney magic cruise in October, (me, my parents, my sisters, husband, and best friend) I think if you're going to get married on a ship then (only my opinion) but I wouldn't invite everyone there, it would just be me and my guy. Then once we got back, we would have a little party or somethign at the church. Anyways, it would be nice to just go there 2 people, it is SOOOOOOOOOOO..... much easier and you don't have to plan anything out, just go by the flow.

SpecialPreskoo (04-20-2003 06:19 AM): the simpler the better. I'm thinking about one of those wedding chapels where you pay the whatever $ for whatever package deal and THEY DO IT ALL! There is one that has packages starting at $300-ish I think. Gatlinburg is another main one I like. whoever wants to go and will pay for their own expenses is welcome to go. It is a big enough place you won't run into everyone all of the time, but still can get with them for a meal or 2 while you are there. I thought about wedding at one of the chapels and then go to somewhere like HardRock for the reception (they have a fun atmosphere... everyone singing YMCA... HAHA!!)... BUY YOUR OWN MEAL... LOL Call me cheap for not wanting to spend MY money on everyone else... LOL I don't care... I don't have it. If it is was up to me, I'd just tell them about it later... but Scott wouldn't like that. Something simple but different is what I'm thinking.
Lori

mommaruthie (04-20-2003 06:24 AM): buffet ; buffet at perkins. oriental theme, everyone in kimonos and eat chinese food and sit on floor. Sipping saki all night.get jade wedding bands. greek theme, all in togas, one hell of a party, drinking Ouzo. I say it should be the next reality show. America marries Lori and we 'show it live'.
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