

Online Learning Community Building:

a Case Study in China

CONSTRUCTION DE LA COMMUNAUTÉ D'APPRENTISSAGE SUR LIGNE:

ÉTUDE DE CAS EN CHINE

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Abstract: Much attention has been paid to online community building in recent years due to its much acclaimed potential of enhancing knowledge construction in the Information Age. However, there is a lack of empirical studies on the process of how online learning community influence knowledge construction in particular and enhance the quality of learning in general. This paper is devoted to a case study of a popular language learning community in China (www.HJenglish.com) by drawing upon the metaphor *online community is a miniature society*, and thus an informal learning model is presented. In the light of the SOCIETY metaphor, virtual space and real social context are converged to facilitate the understanding the complex process of online learning. A text-based analysis of observable online activities and discourse was performed and a follow-up online questionnaire was performed to further explore how online learners conduct their voluntary learning activities and in the meantime shape the cultural environment which in turn facilitates meaningful learning. This paper concludes that to fully grasp the learning process in an online community, three aspects, namely social presence, affective supports and cognitive development, should be taken into consideration.

Key words: online learning community, social presence, constructionism, CALL

Résumé: L'attention prêtée à la construction de la communauté d'apprentissage sur ligne dans les dernières années est due à son potentiel beaucoup proclamé de renforcer la construction du savoir à l'âge d'information. Cependant, il y a lacune dans les recherches empiriques sur le fait que comment la communauté d'apprentissage sur ligne influence la construction du savoir et améliore en général la qualité d'apprentissage. L'article présent entreprend une étude de cas d'une communauté d'apprentissage de langue populaire en Chine (www.HJenglish.com), en utilisant la métaphore « La communauté sur ligne est une société en miniature », et présente ainsi un modèle d'apprentissage informel. A la lumière de la métaphore de « société », l'espace virtuel et le contexte social réel conjurent à faciliter la compréhension du processus complexe de l'apprentissage sur ligne. Une analyse, basée sur le texte, des activités et discours observables sur ligne et une enquête suivante sur ligne sont effectuées pour explorer profondément comment les apprenants sur ligne conduisent leurs activités d'apprentissage volontaires et, en même temps, façonner l'environnement culturel qui à son tour facilite l'apprentissage. L'auteur en arrive à conclure que, pour comprendre pleinement le processus d'apprentissage dans une communauté sur ligne, trois aspects, à savoir la présence sociale, le support affectif et le développement cognitif, doivent être pris en considération.

Mots-Clés: communauté d'apprentissage sur ligne, présence sociale, constructuralisme, CALL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning community building has drawn much attention in recent years with the development of Computer-Mediated Communication technologies. Terms such as E-learning community (Kaplan, n.d.; Weller, 2005), Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Smith, 2003) and Virtual Learning Community (Schwier, 2002) which were originally applied to informal learning are now increasingly accepted among “formal online educators” (Gulati, 2004) who advocate constructivist viewpoints and value collaborative learning. Online learning community is considered as “one of the most important learning concepts in technology-based instructions” (Tu & Corry, 2002) and “a unique way of learning that requires further investigation” (Quan-Haase, 2004). Weller (2005) goes further to predict e-learning community as “a natural end-point in e-learning”. Past empirical studies on community-based learning are carried out mainly in formal learning context by professional educators to grasp the effects of community building on enhancing the quality of learning (Hughes & Daykin, 2002; Khine, et al 2003; Turvey, 2006). Some even carried out studies by “moving a class from cohort to community” (Misanchuk & Anderson, n.d.). However, there are few studies on informal language learning that happens in natural online communities.

Recently, there emerge lots of online language learning portals in China and the trend is still going on. These portals are characterized by free membership, voluntary learning, and openness. They supply learning content to learners, learners are encouraged to participate in the discussion forum by contributing, and communication and interaction are facilitated by portals’ Managers or Moderators. Some portals become mature communities through years of development, such as HJenglish.com, putclub.com, wwenglish.com and bbs.chinadaily.com.cn, etc. They are mature enough to be able to conduct small-scale, free teaching courses, thus they constitute a prominent part of popular education which involves informal learning, as opposed to formal education. It is of significance to examine the learning process inside these “malleable” (Misanchuk & Anderson, n.d.) environments for two reasons: firstly, within these voluntary learning settings, we may be able to decipher the mechanisms to connect individuals and form community, which formal online educators have been painstakingly searching to fulfill collaborative learning; secondly, by examining observable learning activities and discourses in the interactive zones like discussion forum, blog, and even chatroom (only limited portals equipped with chatroom, and not fully developed), we may better understand how online learning community influence knowledge construction in particular and enhance the quality of learning in general, and thus lend support to the merits of learning in a social context.

The present paper is dedicated to a case study of online

learning community in China: HJenglish.com. This is a five-year language learning portal, and the number of its users has surpassed one million (as of September 22nd, 2006). Originally, it focuses on English learning, but now it has extended its teaching content to include other languages like Japanese, France, German, Korean, and Spanish. It is popular among college students. I registered as a member in the discussion forum on July, 26th, 2005 and used to participate actively in the learning and discussion activities. This special experience enables me to examine the learning process not only through objective text-based analysis but also through online questionnaire which was plotted to examine learners’ learning attitudes and feelings. There are three interactive zones: BBS (Discussion Forum), Blog and Bulo. The functionalities of these zones are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Three Interactive Zones and Functionalities

Interactive Zones	Functionalities
BBS (Discussion Forum)	Send and receive PM (Private Messaging) Create new threads Submit a reply Post a survey Upload audio files Edit Post Snippet (keep favorite programs in your own learning space in <i>bulo</i>) Downloads Search Member profile Quick link to Bulo / Blog
Blog	Downloads Interface design model Submit comments Store previous programs Generate new articles Quick link to BBS / Bulo
Bulo (部落, <i>tribe</i>)	Podcast Tag for group-forming Generate programs Reply Quick link to BBS Uploads / Downloads Pose questions / ratings

The biggest feature of this online community is that these three interactive zones are not only linked in technical sense as a web-like pattern but also integrated in human sense by a diversity of colorful programs created by learners. Technologies are adapted to learners’ needs, and learning process is controlled by learners’ general requirements. Democracy prevails as polls and surveys are carried out to consult learners’ demands. The community even introduces its own currency system *Hu Yuan* (similar to *renminbi*) as awards and for purchase use. For all the abovementioned, we conjure up a metaphor, *online learning community is a miniature society*. By using this SOCIETY metaphor, two points are highlighted. For one, online learning community is dynamic and transformative like a society which involves all kinds of social relations

and activities and is bound to change. For another, learners in an online community are active participants, who control learning process and initiate learning activities. Therefore, online learning community is not only learner-centered, but also learner-driven and learner-initiated.

In the following part of this paper, first we review relevant theory and concepts and then explain the methodology of the current study, followed by presentation and interpretation of the investigation's findings. Finally, we wrap up the paper by discussing the findings and making recommendations for future research.

2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT CONCEPTS AND THEORY

This review bridges a general linkage between two fields: online learning community and constructionism, followed by an explanation of concepts of constructionism, online learning community and social presence.

2.1 A Linkage between Online Learning Community and Constructionism

Online learning communities have been advocated to have a significant potential to realize knowledge construction through socially facilitated learning environments (Tu & Corry, 2002; Kaplan, n.d.; Gulati, 2004; Kondratova & Goldfarb, 2004; Turvey, 2006). It's said that approximately 70% of what we need to know at work is learned outside of formal training (Kaplan, n.d.). Therefore, in an online environment, community building has its significance: to extend learning through "informal" discussion, information sharing and problem solving, thus leading to collaborative learning. "Sense of community" (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004), on the other hand, can trigger affective supports for persistent and enjoyable learning. Though various perspectives have been proposed to illustrate the merits of learning community building, their underlying learning notion can be boiled down into constructionism.

2.2 Constructionism

Our daily lives are filled with instances in which we actively shape each other's knowledge and reasoning processes by providing information, elaborating on ideas, and solving problems (Gunawardena, 2005). Learning takes place voluntarily and spontaneously in various activities and is accelerated by affective supports from surrounding affordances such as encouragement, praise and harmonious relations. Recent influential learning theories tend to blend social, affective, and cognitive aspects in one framework to account for the complex learning process. A quick

examination of terms flooded in the literature such as "situated cognition", "socio-constructivism", and "cognitive sociology" as well as "neurobiological, sociocultural perspective" suffices us to come to that judgement. In the case of learning in the online community, constructionism is among the most frequently cited one. It is "an extension of Jean Piaget's constructivism" (Bruckman, 2003), or goes beyond constructivism to include the notion that "the process of learning takes place when the learner is engaged with the construction of something external" (Brook & Oliver, 2003). Rovai (2004) concurs with this view and suggests that "knowledge is the product of many learner-centered processes" and knowledge constructs through "social process of communication and negotiation".

2.3 Online Learning Community

Due to different disciplinary interests, diversified approaches have been proposed to address the concept, which makes the definitive definitions of online learning community even more elusive. For our part, we agree with Rheingold's definition that online community is "social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (cited by Bax, 2003). But we would like to emphasize that those "discussions" must be relevant to the life and needs of learners in the learning community and constructive for the process of turning information into knowledge so as to realize a deep learning. From the metaphor we propose at the beginning, we tend to view online learning community as a social phenomenon. A society is formed (geographically bound), evolving (systematically shaped up), and developed (technologically enhanced). An online community is built (interest-bound), evolving (effectively managed), and expanded (technologically backed-up). This metaphor enables us to deal with the many-sided characteristics of the virtual environment. In the least sense, online learning community is a miniature society which enables learners to find a natural social outlet during the singular course of online learning journey.

2.4 Social Presence

Short (1976) defined social presence as the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships..." (Gunawardena, 2005). As online learning environment is quite different from face-to-face interaction, learners may undergo "loneliness phobia on the net" as a result of lack of facial expressions and gestures in the virtual space, which will inevitably undermine the quality of learning. Gunawardena (2005) suggests that social presence is a strong predictor of learners' satisfaction in computer

conference. Therefore, to fully comprehend the learning process of a virtual environment, social presence should be taken into account. To be specific, on the one hand, Internet technology has unique affordances to help make a constructionist approach to learning viable in realistic settings. On the other hand, learners can use these affordances as well as their discourses to heighten the level of social presence.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD

In addition to merely proffering an empirical study of a case about informal learning in an online environment in China, this paper shows more interest in the following research question:

How can an online learning community facilitate knowledge construction in particular and improve the quality of learning in general?

To be more specific, this study focuses on learners' learning activities, discourses, and their feelings towards learning, towards other learners and towards the community. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are adopted for our specific use, which consists of text-based analysis and online questionnaire.

In such an informal learning environment, we had no control over the learners. However, we are not outside observers. Instead, we immersed ourselves in the learning activities, such as posting, discussion, and problem-solving, so as to be able to plot our questionnaire purposefully and focus on three aspects, social presence, affective supports and cognitive development. Thanks to the functionality of history record in the webpage, we are able to trace down past events of this community and obtain data about the aforementioned three aspects. The questionnaire was designed with the help of www.my3q.com, and thus questionnaire is online <http://www.my3q.com/home2/125/nolittleone/16257.html> and will be there for one year. It consists of 31 items, using a 5-point Likert measurement. We sent private messages to the learners at random and requested them to do the questionnaire. Totally 147 messages were sent out from October 25-29, 2006, and 48 learners do the survey, among which 45 are valid, and 3 are uncompleted. Our descriptive analysis is based on the 48 pieces of result, and the 5-point was later transformed into 3-point by Disagree, Neutral, and Agree for the purpose of a direct and explicit interpretation. .

4. FINDINGS AND EXPLANATIONS

4.1 Findings

Findings are composed of two parts: findings of text-based analysis and online questionnaire results.

4.1.1 Findings of Text-based Analysis

HJenglish.com is not a "screen-text transfer" website (Gu Yueguo, 2006 PacCALL presentation speech). It is integrated with rich audio and video clippings. The most important feature is not the learning information it offers, but the energetic learning community it generates. Differing from other learning portals we have examined, HJenglish.com has the richest and most dynamic programs. "Rich" means programs range from language skills improvement courses, to foreign music appreciation, to cultural immersion. "Dynamic" means programs are updated at fixed intervals, and learners actively interact with the programs and with other learners. The three interactive zones are seamlessly integrated by programs started by whoever has the capacity to manage one. The starter of a program is called Column Host, who has the responsibility to update his / her program at a regular time. The following table gives a sum-up of the activities going on in the community.

By drawing upon the SOCIETY metaphor, we carry out our examination by focusing on three aspects: social presence, affective supports, and cognitive development (Table 3). In a real society, a person has identity, engage in various social activities, and need affective supports. Besides, a real society has its currency system, formalities and cultural values. All these characteristics, if reflected in the virtual environment, can largely reinforce a person's feeling of self-presence and sense of community. We assume that a virtual environment with more possible features of a real society is a prerequisite to realize cognitive development for the reason that learners can actively conduct learning activities without feeling weird or hindered by the virtual milieu.

As to social presence, we examine how learners set up their identity, what kind of social activities they participate in and the currency system in this community. We find that members of this community are all learners. Even those who are titled Column Hosts constantly mention they are a learner just like any other learners in this community. Equal role can generate sympathy among members. In addition, emoticons and metalinguistic cues can "add affective information contextualize the message, and indicate informality" (Gunawardena, 2005). Sense of community is enhanced by holding various activities concerning the interests of the community and learners themselves. During the 5th anniversary ceremony (concurring the time when we did our research), there was a special activity called Wish Wall, which means that learners can express their wishes on a piece of virtual paper and put it on the "wall" of a webpage. We find that lots of learners extend their wishes for themselves, for other learners and for the future of the community. The following sentences are just some of the wishes. We copied them down without any revision, so typing and grammatical errors are preserved.

Studying english is like a snail walking on the road. Although slow, with insistance everyday it will

a remarkable growth.

我是個新加入的菜鳥，但同時我也是個對英語有亙古不變的熱情的愛好者。在朋友介紹下來到滬江，進來之後感覺到身邊多了一大群 friends with common ideals. 我很開心，希望滬江越辦越好，也希望所有滬友心想事成！

A version translated by authors: I am a newbie with persistent zeal in English. Some of my friends introduced me to this website, where I amazingly find groups of friends with common ideas. I am very happy to be here. I wish HJ a bright future and all the HJers good luck.

happy birthday! i am back now after got lost for a long time. at here i hope i will improve my language with everyone.

人靜而能後安，安而能後定，定而能後慧，慧而能後悟，悟而能後得。滬江就是那一塊寧靜的地方，讓我可以靜而得的地方。

A version translated by authors: HJ is a tranquil place that makes me calm, stable, bright and feel fulfilled.

The introduction of Hu Yuan system largely increases learners' participation in learning activities. By contributing postings and creating new programs, learners can obtain Hu Yuan, which functions as money to buy the right of FTP downloading, personal space, like uploading space, and blog. The rationale is that the more you contribute, the more money you will earn. According to one of the in-house surveys, learners like this system, and their attitude towards Hu Yuan undergoes changes as their learning experience goes on with time. Hu Yuan finally symbolizes a mixture of wealth, achievement, and encouragement.

As to affective supports, the three interactive zones are filled with encouragement and praise. When learners take their postings seriously and contribute constructive suggestions or information, they will be awarded with not only extra Hu Yuan but also positive words which have significant impacts on sense of community. Moreover, gossip-like talking that is unusual in formal learning is found here when teaching and learning takes place. By talking about the off-topic things learners' psychological distance can be drawn nearer. Actual learning thus can begin in a more relaxed atmosphere. This also contributes to the formation of friendly relations and a harmonious environment.

As to cognitive development, though we can not directly measure the outcomes of their learning, we are able to find activities that motivate learners' intrinsic needs which present the best possible opportunities for learning. Some more knowledgeable learners design programs, upon which they elaborate to other learners. Meanwhile they deepen and extend their knowledge base. Learners are also encouraged to be Assistant Host. As a saying goes, the best way for a learner to learn is to be a teacher. In addition, by

counting the frequency of words in the goals that learners set, we find learners value persistence most when they setting goals (Table 4 & Fig. 1). This increases the potential to log in for learning everyday, and eventually learning in the virtual space constitutes part of their real life.

4.1.2 Online Questionnaire Descriptive Results

The online questionnaire is designed to examine learners' feelings, learning conditions and how they perceive the qualities of a good online learner. The qualities of a good online learner are a revised version based on one article which lists qualities of how to be a good online learner. (http://222.92.21.147/sudaceo/Article_Show.asp?ArticleID=1153)

Table 5 shows that more than half of the participants agree with these qualities. However, the degree of agreement varies. Noticeably, the quality of being able to help others solve problem ranks the highest percentage of Agree (84.7%), the lowest percentage neither agree or disagree, and comparatively low percentage of Disagree. Open-minded and willing to share feelings ranks the second in Agree. While the quality of being good at questioning, percentage of Agree ranks lowest (54.2%), Neutral ranks highest, and comparatively high percentage Disagree.

The rest of the results are sorted into four categories: social emotions (Table 6), cognitive development (Table 7), learning compared with classroom (Table 8), and quality of learning life in the online community (Table 9). By doing so, we are able to compare the figures between different items so as to find out the possible relations between the social, affective and cognitive aspects. Particularly, we want to point out the following figures which can elicit interesting findings about the learning process in this online community.

Table 6 shows a high percentage 89.4% of the learners expresses thanks openly to other learners' help. 61.6% feel responsible to make the community more suited to others.

Table 7 shows significant agreement (73.8%) among learners that they can learn things that can be applied to life, but no significant agreement (39.96%) in relevance to school studies.

Table 8 shows 65.9% agree that learning in the community more efficient than in school classroom. 61.84% disagree that community is less interactive than school classroom.

4.2 Explanations

Combining the observations of activities and discourses in the community and the online questionnaire results, we are able to obtain the following findings:

1st. Learners' social presence is enhanced with various means, such as the assignment of titles, welcome formalities, wishes expressing and the introduction of

currency system.

2nd. Learners value interpersonal relationship, helping others to solve problems (item 29), expressing thanks to others (item 6), making the community more suited to others (item 9), with high percentage of Agree respectively; while the quality of being good at questioning is relatively under the wind among the list of the qualities. As Hao Qin Hai (2005) points out, “Chinese learners have a strong desire to take initiative to cooperate and communicate with others and learn with others, they actively contribute to the maintenance of a harmonious learning atmosphere. This facilitates group-centered collaborative and autonomous learning.”

3rd. Affective supports also make the sense of community more prominent.

4th. Learners feel their learning more useful to life and less relevant to their school and their learning is efficient than school learning through goal-setting, group-based collaborative learning, etc.

5th. HJ community is an environment as informal and as natural as real life, which largely reflects Chinese cultural values. Evidence to support this can also be found from learners’ use of *big family* metaphor and their goals

made to realize day-to-day log-in (Fig. 2). Thus, in this sense, virtual space is connected with reality and is an “extension” of real life (Li, Zhang & Liu, 2004).

Dudley, et al. (2001) mentioned that intrinsic motivation is associated with numerous aspects of the academic experience, where basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are concerned. Intrinsically motivated activities are those that the learner engages in for their own sake because of their value, interest, and challenge. We think that the activities in this community are concerned with learners’ competence (singing contest), autonomy (goal-setting and schedule), and relatedness (Wish Wall). Their voluntary participation itself is an indicator of their interest and devotion. Learners outsource learning materials and comprehend the information before they present the knowledge they obtain from the information to other learners. We would like to put the process as this: sharing locally while exploiting global Internet store, generating locally useful materials but developing a global perspective (this may also be what the theme “Internationalization and Localization of CALL” wants to convey). Information is thus transformed into knowledge and learning quality is greatly enhanced during these activities and social interaction.

Table 2: Three Interactive Zones of HJenglish.com and Activities

Interactive Zones of HJenglish.com	Activities
<p>BBS (Discussion Forum)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Programs come out in the forum threads and are updated periodically ● Learners participate under the instruction of the Column Hosts ● Learners discuss the problem by pointing to another thread
<p>Blog</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mainly written by the Column Hosts ● Some are written by professional teachers popular among learners ● Column programs are kept for easy retrieval ● Comments and questions are submitted
<p>Bulo (部落, tribe)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Most of the programs in the BBS are initially generated here by learners, who are making their way to the position of Column Host; ● Goal-setting, group-forming and question-asking and answering ● Subscribe programs ● Snippets

Table 3 Social Presence, Affective Supports & Cognitive Development

Aspects		SOCIETY metaphor: <i>Online community is a miniature society</i>
Social Presence	Identity	Role: all are learners
		Titles: Column Host, Moderator, HJ Assistant, Music Fan, etc.
		Emoticons: >_<, ^_^, +U+U~~~, \(\^o^\)/, orz, --
		Metalinguistic cues: LOL, hooray~~~, //bow
		Welcome formalities of newbies
Virtual Social Events	HJ Anniversary ceremony	
	Wish Wall Foreign song contest Weekly periodical	
Hu Yuan (滬元) system	Awards and special awards	
Affective Supports	Encouragement / Praise	感謝支持:))) . well done!! 非常準確! God job! 做得很好呢~ :) 沙發+勤學獎勵 已經獎勵 1enmay 單個用戶操作: 金錢 40 經驗 20 魅力 20
	Gossip-like Talking	At-the-moment mood, or next week planning, or happenings at home, or climate in their location.
Cognitive Development	Learning by Doing	Self-designed programs Uploading self-made streaming audio Self-made listening materials and improving the listening transcripts (1 min, 70s, 3 mins) Outsourcing clips, audio and video from Internet
	Goal-setting	Groups of the same goal Snippet of column programs Log about learning schedule
	Question-posing	Various questions about learning, meta-learning, information checking, decision-making, life, etc.

Table 4 Learning Attitudes and Frequency

Learning Attitude	Frequency	Words searched
learning persistently	617	堅持
hard-working	118	努力/用功
learning for fun	40	開心/快樂
learning with extra efforts	83	加油
learning with bitterness	13	苦
learning with courage	4	勇敢/振作

Table 5 Qualities of a Good Online Learner

Quality \ Attitude	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Communicative through writing (item 25)	12.97% (6)	26.0% (12)	60.8% (28)
Open-minded and willing to share feelings (item 26)	12.49% (6)	10.4% (5)	77.0% (37)
Inquisitive (item 27)	8.69% (4)	36.9% (17)	54.2% (25)
Considerate (item 28)	8.88% (4)	26.6% (12)	64.3% (29)
Helpful (item 29)	6.25% (3)	8.69% (4)	84.7% (39)
Keeping-pace (item 30)	4.44% (2)	22.2% (10)	73.3% (33)
Seizing learning chance (item 31)	6.38% (3)	27.6% (13)	65.9% (31)

Table 6 Social Emotions

Feelings \ Attitude	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Nervous when discussing (item 2)	64.5% (31)	25.0% (12)	10.41% (5)
Eager to find groupship (item 3)	17% (8)	25.5% (12)	57.4% (27)
More active to participate online activities (item 4)	24.96% (12)	25.0% (12)	49.9% (24)
Express thanks openly(item 6)	6.37% (3)	4.25% (2)	89.4% (42)
Guilty when off-line for some time (item 8)	48.8% (23)	27.6% (13)	23.35% (11)
Responsible to contribute (item 9)	12.76% (6)	25.5% (12)	61.6% (29)
Trust in others (item 14)	15.2% (7)	34.7% (16)	50% (23)
Frustrated because of being neglected (item 21)	59.9% (27)	17.7% (8)	22.14% (10)
Emulative (item 19)	24.42% (11)	31.1% (14)	44.38% (20)
Advice from more knowledgeable learners (item 12)	16.92% (8)	31.9% (15)	51.01% (24)

Table 7 Cognitive Development

Cognitive Self-evaluation	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Deepened understanding (item 5)	14.58% (7)	41.6% (20)	43.73% (21)
Clarified points (item 13)	15.17% (7)	23.9% (11)	60.8% (28)
Applied to life (item 7)	10.8% (5)	15.2% (7)	73.8% (34)
Relevant to school studies (item 20)	26.62% (12)	33.3% (15)	39.96% (18)

Table 8 Learning Compared with School Classroom

More efficient (item 23)	10.63% (5)	23.4% (11)	65.9% (31)
Less interactive (item 24)	61.84% (26)	21.4% (9)	16.66% (7)
Worried about ability to be better (item 22)	48.88% (22)	22.2% (10)	28.84% (13)
Express fluently (item 15)	26.04% (12)	39.1% (18)	34.77% (16)

Table 9 Quality of Learning Life

Purposeful (have schedule) (item 16)	10.41% (5)	31.2% (15)	58.2% (28)
Find ways to improve (item 11)	14.85% (7)	36.1% (17)	48.8% (23)
Carrying out schedule (item 10)	10.86% (5)	30.4% (14)	58.6% (27) #
Aimless/"Distraction" (item 17)	35.3% (17)	27% (13)	37.45% (18)
Free (item 18)	19.94% (9)	22.2% (10)	57.68% (26)

two are missing

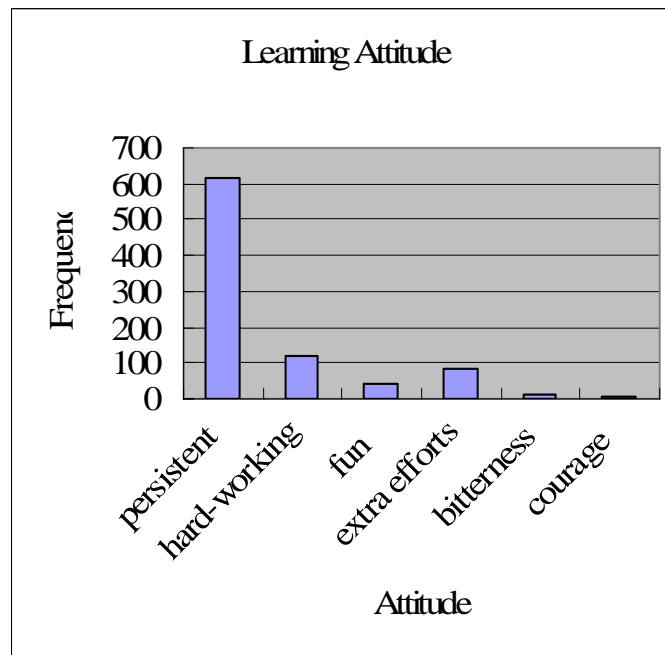


Fig. 1 Learning Attitude

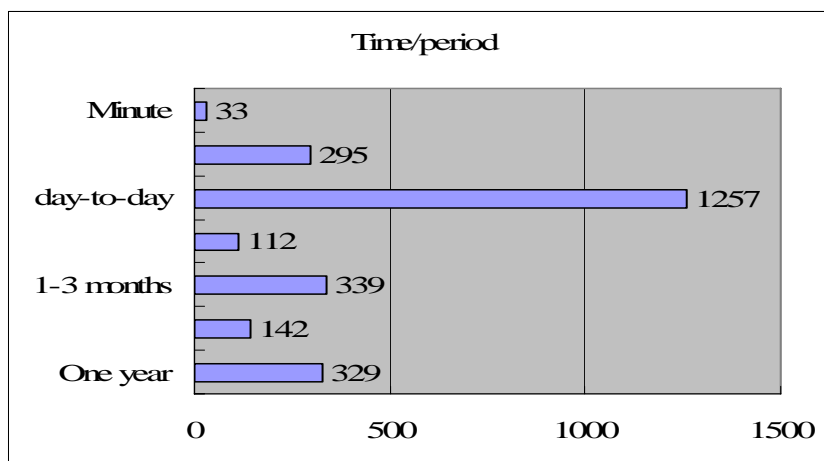


Fig. 2: Time in Goal-setting

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We present an online learning community that learners initiate and control the learning process. Through activities and discussion, group-forming and goal-setting, learners create a harmonious environment for collaborative learning, and learning quality is greatly improved. We believe that when an online environment has more features similar to real life, learners' learning will be greatly facilitated. We have also developed a preliminary assessment scheme to evaluate the quality of learning in the online community focusing on three aspects, namely, social presence, affective supports and cognitive development. This scheme will be further enriched.

This is only an exploratory study of a case with a small sample. Nevertheless, past literature and this case have

given us lots of implications.

Firstly, from our investigation, we find a multi-aged group with a passionate commitment to learning. If an online learning community develops like a miniature society, as we have proposed the SOCIETY metaphor, then an online learning community is not merely learner-centered; in fact, online learning in a community is a learner-driven process. To make a community successfully develop, appropriate incentive system must be introduced, in our case, the Hu Yuan system.

Secondly, we find that the position of Host is significant. Host undertakes the role of teacher, facilitator, organizer and manager. They teach other learners; they create positive environment to facilitate learning; they organize and maintain the community activities; and they manage groups and subgroups in the Buluo. However, their behaviors during these activities have not been examined through comparison and contrast in detail. A detailed study

by Rovai (2003) about the relationships of communicator style, personality-based learning style, and classroom community among online graduate students has set up a good example for us to follow.

Thirdly, as the “net generation” (if there should have in China) enters higher education, they will come with an expectancy of discussing with more a broader circle of peers. Thus, online learning community’s popularization becomes an issue of time. This implies that teachers who are capable of teaching learners in such kind of community are needed. Therefore, we envisage such a program in which students of foreign language in the higher education are encouraged to join in online learning community of this kind and assume some role as Column Host or Assistant, Moderator. In this way, they can develop content designing skills and interpersonal communication skills and obtain possible effective pedagogical methods.

Fourthly, we have observed that most learners consider daily log-in as a part of life, not being forced. This reminds us of Bax (2003)’s envision of the future of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning): “integrated CALL”. He utilizes the concept of “normalization” which refers to the stage when the technology becomes invisible, embedded in everyday practice and hence “normalized”. “CALL will reach [such a] state when computers are used every day by language students, like they use the pen and book” (Bax, 2003). This vision seems to be slowly emerging as online learning communities evolves. We would rather propose the term Community-Assisted Language Learning to emphasize more on people, going beyond technology and to welcome the coming of online communities, a most likely gateway toward “integrated CALL”.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH

Having realized the limitation of our study, the future study will be devoted to involve more subjects and other learning communities, or the same type of community in other countries. This is also a process for us to revise and enrich our evaluation scheme. We would like to point out that this scheme is not intended to mix up the social, affective, and cognitive factors into one test tube and let them react, but the underlying mechanism of collaborative learning calls for the mixture. The rationale is that social interaction turns information into knowledge, and thus brings about learners’ cognitive development, while affective factor acts as catalyzer.

Future research will also focus on more detailed aspects, such as the comparison of the learning process of Column hosts and ordinary learners, the discourses in forum discussion, group-based learning effects as well as goal-setting discourse and its impacts on possible realization.

Besides, we find that listening programs are far more popular than other programs in HJenglish.com community. Do other communities show the same tendency? 1) If so, why are listening programs far more popular? Is there any other factor in addition to learners’ desire to improve their learning skills? 2) If not, what kind of pedagogy of teaching listening in HJenglish.com is adopted to make it so popular among learners? There are still other aspects that hold our interest which we may conduct further investigation. For example, the factor of trust when gathering data in online questionnaire. Private message or open request in discussion thread? Whether containing self-disclosure and address of their names or not, in native language (Chinese) or English?

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APPENDIX A

Online questionnaire:

Item1. What do you think is the best place for learning in an online community?

- (1) Discussion forum (2) Blog (3) Chatroom (4) Personal learning space
(5) Public learning space (6) Other

The following items should be scaled on a 5 point basis. 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4- agree, 5- strongly

agree

As a language learner in this online community,

Item 2. I feel nervous when I take part in discussion.

Item 3. I feel eager to find out learners who have the same interest as I do.

Item 4. I find I am more active to participate in online activities (BBS discussion, singing contest, and making comments on others' work) than activities in reality.

Item 5. I find most of the time I'm deepening my understanding of what I have learnt before.

Item 6. I express thanks openly to people who provide me with their learning materials.

Item 7. I find what I learn here useful to my life.

Item 8. I feel guilty when I am off-line for some time.

Item 9. I have the responsibility to make this online learning community better suited to other learners.

Item 10. I make my learning schedule and feel responsible to carry it out.

Item 11. I can find ways to improve where I am weak in.

Item 12. I can always get advice from more knowledgeable learners.

Item 13. I become clearer about the language points I learnt before.

Item 14. I always trust in other learners.

Item 15. I can communicate my thought fluently in language that I am learning.

I find my learning life here is

Item 16. active, because I have my own learning plan.

Item 17. forced, because I find so many new learning programs waiting for me.

Item 18. free, no pressing time and no compulsory assignment.

Item 19. a match with other peer learners.

Item 20. Relevant to my school studies

Item 21. frustrated as no one notices me.

Compared with a school classroom,

Item 22. I feel worried about how I can learn better in an online community.

Item 23. My language learning in an online community is more efficient.

Item 24. I find online communities less interactive.

I think a good online learner should:

Item 25. Be good at communicating through writing

Item 26. Be open-minded and willing to share with others his/her own learning experience and life joys.

Item 27. Be good at questioning.

Item 28. Take his/her posting seriously, thinking before posting.

Item 29. Be capable of helping other learners to solve problems.

Item 30. Be able to keep pace with the learning courses

Item 31. Take advantage of all practice opportunities

Personal information:

● **Your net age:**

(1) Less than 1 months (2) 1-6months (3) 6-12months

(4) 1-2years (5) More than 2 years

● **Education level:**

(1) Primary (2) Secondary (3) High school

(4) University (5) Postgraduate (6) Other

● **Gender:**

Male () Female ()

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