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Educational MUVES: Virtual Learning Communities

Jeff Cooper

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Posted on **December 1, 2003** by **Editor**

By **Jeff Cooper** 503-352-3088 (lab)
Education Technology Specialist 503-352-2714 (office)
College of Education 503-352-2905 (fax)
jbcoops@gmail.com

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.01 **Introduction** (return to index)

Virtual Learning Communities (VLCs) differ from Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) because the very nature of "community" holds greater meaning and potential than "environment." Environments offer a surrounding within which to create, explore and learn. Communities offer tools inherent within environments, but also sustain professional growth and development through their ongoing nature. Collaboration takes place within both VLCs and VLEs; however once a course is complete in a VLE, the collaboration ceases, or diminishes greatly between the participants. VLCs focus on creating and sustaining professional relationships through time, with no end date.

A VLE may or may not choose to embrace the VLC concept; those in charge of a VLE may take it towards asynchronous coursework, with distinct beginning and end points; or another, towards polysynchronous professional collaboration and community building, with increasing the

size and wealth of the community over years is the goal. Educational MUVEs such as Tapped In <http://www.tappedin.org/new> or Diversity Unversity <http://moo.du.org/> represent VLCs; most online courses represent VLEs; the Ikarus Seminar <http://www.online-seminar.net/> represents something in between the two.

Collaboration requires time. Determining whom you will work with, what the approach(es) will be to the "task" (a term I have always felt a loathing towards, as if the word "onerous" should always precede it). Education should be enjoyable, and collaborating with peers (and non-peers) leads to an array of interesting dynamics. On the one hand, in a group such as Ikarus, there is a certain homogeneity to the general group of participants: virtually all are educators. On the other hand wide disparities exist between the participants, and coalescing as a team, let alone producing even a work in progress, over a short period of time creates challenges sometimes overwhelming in nature. Some groups could not complete a "finished product." In the two groups that I moderated, I feel that there were wide disparities between ability levels (technological, English levels, pedagogical approaches) as well as positions towards the task at hand, that the results were a stunning example of what happens when two disparate groups operate with different approaches and **within different modes, namely one within a VLC and another within a VLE**. It's not an either or situation of VLE or VLC or a choice between synchronous or polysynchronous.

The main goal for most educators is to facilitate collaboration, to motivate learners, and validate the experience for everyone involved (people should walk away feeling good about the time they have spent). In VLEs, people may walk away from a course feeling negative about the experience; Ikarus prided itself that this recent session had less than 25% attrition. If a number exists that is acceptable, then it may be possible to quantitatively assess the success of a VLE based upon this theoretical number. VLCs do not live or die so quickly; their success depends on its members contributing and being active over time; their success hinges upon increasing quality membership, openness of communication between groups, improving staff development sessions and techniques. Assessing a VLC therefore comes a more qualitative than quantitative assignment.

.02 **Educational MUVEs and Accessibility** (return to index)

One issue regarding VLEs or VLCs is user access. Although technology doubles every 18 months, the computers used in an average K-12 classroom may be five years old or older. This may (and usually does) cause problems of connectivity, especially at sites that are technology intensive (heavy graphics, javascripting, flash, etc.). For that reason MUVEs have an advantage of being accessible from a wide range of technology. My first Educational MUVE was Diversity University, which I connected to, and may still connect to, using nothing more than a 386 with a shell connection. Granted, this was a text only connection, but my speed during that first connection was just as fast as my graphic connection at Tapped In 2 today using a 2gig processor with 256 megs of RAM. The important note here is that technology does no good to the end user if it is inaccessible, and that MUVEs give users a range of access points, whether

through raw telnet (not recommended), or a telnet client (easy to use, I recommend Pueblo <http://pueblo.sourceforge.net/pueblo/index.php> for PC users, or MacMOOse <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Bruckman/MacMOOSE/> for Mac users).

There are several advantages to using Educational MUVEs:

1. Accessible by all levels of technology, needing only a 386 to connect, but able to accommodate and grow with the Net as capabilities change. TI2 currently works towards having real time audio/video connectivity.

2. Sustained support and development. Almost daily mini-seminars are held in all fields and levels of K-12 education. The calendar of events http://tappedin.org/cgi-bin/calendar/ti2calendar.cgi allows educators to plan which staff development workshop they may attend.

3. Usually in a month, there will be at least one or more workshop that will be relevant to any teacher's needs. This sustainability helps bring educators back to TI2.

4. This link to academic papers in support of Educational MUVEs <http://pages.ivillage.com/edmoo> is a site I have created that links to a myriad of

    A. Academic papers supporting the use of MOOs/MUVEs in the K-12 classroom

    B. b. Tutorials (some written by me, some by others) in support of Educational MUVEs

    C. c. LINC Project with Fermilab: Online project in support of Educational MUVES:

        i. i. Project Summary http://tappedin.org/cgi-bin/calendar/ti2calendar.cgi

        ii. *ii. Project Presentation*
            <http://wwwed.fnal.gov/lincon/w99/projects/muve/present.htm>

5. Tools

    A. Synchronous chat. Chat is secure if desired; rooms may be locked. Chat is logged automatically at TI2 and also automatically emailed to a user's account upon logoff. This allows for synchronous meetings that may later be posted for those unable to attend the chat.

    B. MOOmail. On all MUVEs, you may create mailing lists, which are subscribed to by members, which then act as message boards. Members may choose whether the messages remain on the MUVE, or may set the preference to have the message forwarded to their email account.

    C. Threaded Discussion Boards (TI2 Only). Threaded message boards allow for discussions to take place and develop asynchronously. One advantage to having MUVEs such as TI2 is that after a course is over, the discussion may continue as other members discover the thread, and continue it.

    D. Whiteboard (TI2) The ability to post notes, which are temporary, allows users to connect with those offline, or brainstorm while online.

    E. File Sharing (TI2) Users may upload files and make them accessible to either the public, or a select few (depending on user preference).

    F. Public Link Sharing (TI2) Users may add URLs to a links database and make them available for the public.

    G. Many of the above TI2 features may be developed using Encore Xpress freeware

open source client.

These links are designed as support for educators who may wish to use Educational MUVEs in their own classrooms. MUVEs are free to join and use, and it is possible for a school or district to create their own. Software is freeware:

1. Lambda MOO Core from the Alladin Project.
<http://www.alladin.ac.uk/support/moo/setting.html>

2. Encore Express Client. The developers have open sourced this software, and you may view the interface at Lingua MOO <http://lingua.utdallas.edu/> Again, this is freeware and open source, but will require programmers to install and maintain. The download for the Encore Xpress Client may found at http://lingua.utdallas.edu/encore/ The creators of Encore Xpress have also written an excellent book entitled High Wired <http://www.press.umich.edu/titles/08838.html>

.03 **Rationale: Why Use or Create an Educational MUVE?** (return to index)

Virtual Presence

Creating and building your own Educational MUVE will allow a school or entire district to have an online polysynchronous presence. It allows students to build their own rooms, converse with others in a safe environment (guests may be monitored or excluded altogether), and collaborate.

Develop Programming Skills

Students may be granted "programmer bits" that will allow them to develop Object Oriented Programming skills within the VLE. Students may advance from guest, user, builder, programmer, manager, administrator to "wizard" levels depending upon their developed skills and sense of responsibility. Learning hands on programming within the environment develops skills while simultaneously giving a sense of purpose towards the virtual community. Students may program online even if their hardware is no better than a 386.

Sustainable Community

It is important for students to take part not just during their stay at the academic institution, but to continue to exist within the environment beyond the scope of their stay as students for the environment to develop more as a community. This sustainability enables students to become mentors to students who follow them, and indeed, mentor educators as well. This allows relationships to evolve beyond the typical teacher-student relationship into a growing collaborative where everyone participates to the best of their ability in developing the collaborative process.

.04 **Concentric Circles** (return to index)

In a world where we know that collaboration is a major key ingredient for successful professional growth and staff development, it is interesting to note that there are few "Venn Intersects" between teacher training programs and professional collaboratoriums. To demonstrate:

**Learning Communities Courses:**

Pacific University
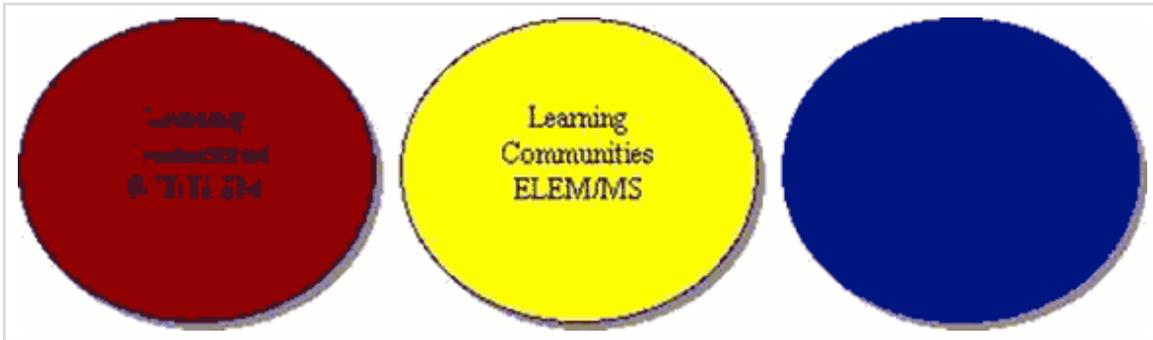
These three circles represent the Learning Communities courses at the university I work at. All of the courses cover similar subjects, and students are grouped according to the strands they are in. All Early Childhood students work together, as do the Elementary/Middle and the Middle/High School strands. Although covering similar materials, none of the strands has any contact with students in the other strands. The result is that each strand creates close connections with their own cohorts, but has no relationship (professional or otherwise, with outside strands.

The same can be viewed on a larger scale:

Communities of Practice Courses: Three Universities

Here are three courses from three different universities (both "real" and virtual), that in different ways cover similar ground. No one from any university has contact with anyone else from any other university, nor is there any mechanism in place that would allow for contact between either students or instructors to compare notes, hold discussions, or build upon each other's work.
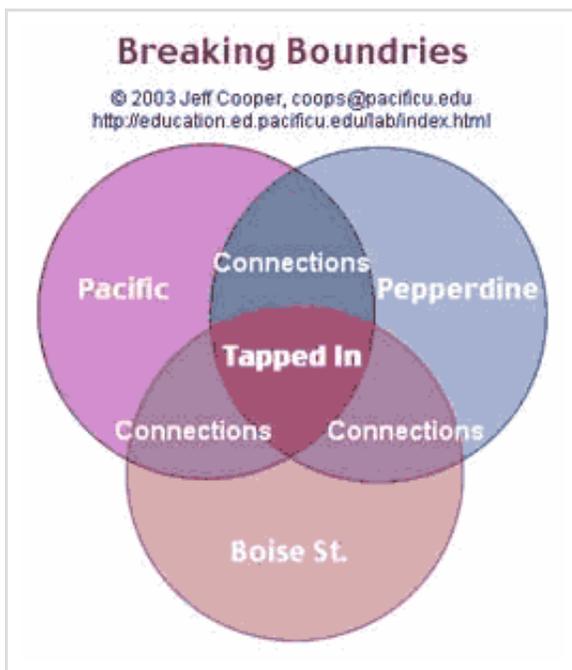
The Venn Diagram demonstrates the intersection of three programs, using Tapped In as the catalyst for converging three VLEs within a VLC. A similar diagram could be made for the intersection of three strands at pacific, or any other sets of "concentric circles."

By facilitating communication between circles and cohorts of individuals who without technology would never meet, it may be possible to create greater understanding, develop professional relationships, and perhaps discover new consensus.

This shows potential for different universities, or different classes within one university, to use a VLE to develop and create a community relationship beyond the scope of the original class. Currently, no protocol exists for students to communicate outside of their own circle. Having students work "outside the box" gives us a glimpse into the future, where students need no longer limit themselves to the parameters of one institution.

.05 **Process vs. Product** (return to index)

Most classes and VLEs focus on creation of an end product (paper, final exam, etc.) rather than the creative learning process. Once a class concludes, relationships between participants ends. Within a VLC, focus may be on product, but focus on process and sustainability of professional relationships may continue through time. First, by breaking down institutional walls, relationships may develop that never would in real lif, Second, the parameters of a specific course do not apply to a VLC, since the participants may continue to collaborate with others outside of their immediate circles for years to come. Perhaps most importantly, a professional collaborative develops as the community grows, and support remains within the virtual community , long after the "real" classroom community dissipates.

Screenshot from Tapped In 2 http://www.tappedin.org/new

.06 **Conclusions** (return to index)

As educators realize the potential for global learning, collaboration, problem solving, they will become more and more willing to step outside of their own academic communities, and become members of VLCs. Students may indeed be the early adopters and leaders in this movement, as they discover resources existing outside of their brick and mortar institutions. Communities grow, evolve, and offer support mechanisms that sustain over time, something that brick and mortar and even VLEs fail to do once a student no longer is part of the institution. Sustained staff and professional development requires a commitment and an involvement within a community environment.

I welcome any and all comments and responses to the positions stated within this paper.

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7 THOUGHTS ON "EDUCATIONAL MUVES: VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES"

Bialystok
on **January 30, 2014 at 7:09 AM** said:

Take a 10-minute break during by the hour that you just study. Produce a schedule that a single could stay with it.

headlines
on **January 30, 2014 at 1:56 PM** said:

Hey, thank you for the feedback! I would suggest that saying "God died on a cross" is not specific more than enough theological terminology to accurately describe what happened there. Vague terminology like that will result in deviant thinking about the trinity. Of course I do not believe it's the cardinal sin to use vague phrases, but I consider it can reveal our confusion when it comes to the trinity.

plotka
on **February 1, 2014 at 1:55 AM** said:

A person basically assist to build much content articles I would state. That is the very first time I frequented your web site page and up to now? I amazed with the analysis you made to produce this actual post extraordinary. Excellent task!

porady
on **February 1, 2014 at 2:15 AM** said:

This is my first time pay a visit at here and i am actually impressed to read everthing at alone place.

social network
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:48 AM** said:

While you will be driving a individual jet, it is incredibly critical wear shoes which might be comfortable and just removable. It is likely it is advisable to look at them off as soon as under-going security checks. Sandals or flip-flops are footwear that may be well suited for traveling.

temat
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:57 AM** said:

This is my very first time pay a visit at here and i am actually impressed to read everthing at alone place.

nigeria entertainment news
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:42 AM** said:

I believe other site proprietors must consume this site as an type very clean and excellent kind and design, in addition to the content. You're an expert in this topic!