

(ECSCW 01 workshop position paper)

## **Virtually Deschooling Society**

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### **General Background**

I originally trained as a school teacher and I would now consider myself as a practitioner and researcher in the facilitation of learning. I also have interests in Human-Computer Interaction, Computer Supported Cooperative Work and fishing.

The two most important theoretical influences on my views on learning are: Lave and Wenger's Situated Learning, and Illich's Deschooling Society.

### **Research Background**

I have carried out research into the technological support of informal collaborative learning in the workplace [1], [2], [7]. An important part of the research was to find a medium of communication that was easy to create or capture but that conveyed a rich representation of practice. We conducted a number of investigations into the use of recorded demonstrations for sharing practice.

- I feel an important point to consider is that some *physical* environments are flawed as settings for the sharing of specific skills and the virtual representation of practice may offer advantages that do not exist in the physical.

I was a member of the Learning in Networked Communities (LiNC) project at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, USA [3],[4]. This was a project focused on supporting web-based collaborative learning between schools and between schools and the university. The project made use of the telecommunications infrastructure provided by the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV). During my time on this project our principal interest was experimenting with desktop videoconferencing between the classrooms. The particular demands of the videoconferencing medium appeared to empower a set of previously relatively disadvantaged students.

- I think it is important to remember that text is not the only virtual communication medium.

More recently, I have been wrestling with the problems of university education [5], [6]. My principal concern is the inauthenticity of most university learning and how this can be

addressed by “virtual deschooling”. University students rightly understand that university is a community of practice where the “real” practice is getting a good grade and ultimately getting a degree, the rest is just window dressing. What makes this practice inauthentic, however, is that it has little value outside of a university.

I have experimented with bringing together university students and outside domain experts in a virtual environment (Authentic Learning Environment), unfortunately the mentality of schooling is not that easily defeated. The all-powerful collective motivation of getting a good grade ensured that the virtual space became an extension of the university, where university rules of reality held sway. My current interest is “exposing” students to well established virtual communities with strong existing authentic motivations. Although I am generally pessimistic, I am interested in investigating whether virtual interaction can blur the distinction between inside and outside of the university and challenge the participant’s identities as students (or degree-getters).

- Once again, the virtual may be able to offer something that is not easily available in the physical.

## **Workshop**

My main interest in this workshop is to try to develop a better understanding of the characteristics and limitations of virtual communities of practice.

## **References**

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