Alienation in the learning environment: a failure of community?

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The author suggests that we need to focus on a ‘failure of communication’ rather than on a ‘failure of community’ in order to help establish online learning environments that are most likely to support engaged collaborative learning. She first briefly considers the problematic nature of the idea of learning communities based on belonging, and then shows how a focus on the learning community as a ‘communicative event’ may help us understand the issue of alienation and the complexity of the learning environment within which it might arise. She concludes by arguing that our focus may need to be more on supporting dialogue within the learning environment rather than seeking to establish belonging in a learning community.

Introduction

The experience of alienation within the learning environment can be defined as: ‘the estrangement of the learner from what they should be engaged in, namely the subject and process of study itself’ (Mann, 2001, p. 8). By this I mean the experience someone may have in education, by which they feel unable to engage or contribute in ways which are meaningful and productive for the realisation of their own potential and learning requirements. This may include the experience of feeling held back, blocked, inhibited, estranged or isolated from what it is they are learning, and the study practices and learning processes, both individual and social, which are part of their particular learning context (it is important to note that I am not here using the term alienation in the pure Marxist sense associated with the division of labour and relations of property within capitalism). Recent publications have pointed to the relevance of this concept of alienation for understanding the student’s experience in traditional face-to-face higher education contexts (see, for example, Wilshire, 1990; Bennett, 2003; Mann, 2001, 2003c; Read et al., 2003).

The following offer two examples of alienation in traditional higher education contexts.

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**Example 1:** Read *et al.* (2003) describe a young Asian student as saying: ‘Everybody wants to know but nobody wants to ask a question’ (p. 270). According to the authors, the students feel constrained from engaging actively in the class in order to progress their own learning. They suggest that this is because the students have adopted an understanding of what it is to be a ‘good’ student — which is to be independent and clever. Since asking a question would be seen to be not independent and clever, this assumption about goodness can be said to alienate students from their capacity to act positively to resolve a problem they are facing in their learning. Read *et al.* argue that this assumption about goodness is further compounded by what they argue is the impenetrability of academic culture, especially to those for whom it is not familiar and who are not from the middle class.

**Example 2:** Mann (2003a) describes a classroom situation where the teacher and the students seem to be alienated from each other through a lack of knowledge about the different experiences each has of being in the same face-to-face classroom, which seems to constrain how they act and interact in it. Both students and the teacher experience silence as difficult, but each interprets the significance of this and acts on this differently. The students feel constrained from participating and contributing; the teacher feels constrained to act in response to his interpretation of the ‘mood’ of the class. Neither knows the other is constrained by the other in this way.

These two examples from traditional face-to-face higher education classrooms suggest that one factor constraining engagement is the assumptions that participants make about what is or is not appropriate or significant in the different learning environments. In the first example, the assumption is about being a good student; in the second example, participants are ignorant of each other’s experience and make assumptions concerning the significance of each other’s behaviour without checking this out. In both examples, one could say that there is an attempt not to risk disapproval by breaking an assumed code of behaviour, and that this constrains the possibility for students, and teachers, to engage actively in the learning process.

In the past 10–15 years, developments in the use of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) in education have been seen as a means to minimise some of the potentially alienating constraints posed by conventional face-to-face learning environments, and to support the role that education can play in contributing to social democracy (see, for example, E-Quality Network, 2002). As well as the constraints signalled by the two examples above, others which CMC has been seen to have the potential to mitigate include geographical and time barriers, the unequal distribution of the opportunity and capacity to communicate provided by face-to-face group learning contexts, and potential stereotyping and negative expectancy effects arising from visual and aural-social markers such as accent, race and gender. CMC has also been seen as a particularly apt medium for supporting more learner-centred pedagogies, informed by social constructionist and situated learning theories (McConnell, 2000; Nichani, 2000; Zimmer *et al.*, 2000; Ebersole, 2003; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). These approaches give significance to learner participation in the social construction of knowledge through cooperative and collaborative group work, within the context of online learning communities whose purpose is to provide learners with
a sense of belonging and connectedness, based in part on the shared purpose of learning.

However, recent research suggests that the potential that CMC and the idea of the online learning community has to reduce the experience of alienation in learning may not always be realised (see, for example, Wilshire, 1990; Gray, 1999; Williamson, 2000; Conrad, 2002; Sujo de Montes et al, 2002; Mann, 2003a).

The concept of the online learning community makes the assumption that a pedagogic focus on establishing feelings of connection and belonging is likely to reduce potential alienation in the online learning process. The purpose of this article is to propose a focus on alienation in the learning environment as potentially arising from a ‘failure of communication’ instead. To do this, I first briefly consider the problematic nature of the idea of learning communities based on belonging. I then show how a focus on the learning community as a ‘communicative event’ may help us understand the issue of alienation and the complexity of the learning environment within which it might arise. I then finish the article by arguing that our focus may need to be more on supporting dialogue within the learning environment, rather than seeking to establish belonging in a learning community.

**Alienation—a failure of community?**

Might it be possible to counter a potential experience of alienation in the learning environment by establishing learning communities in which a sense of belonging, shared purpose, relatedness and support are fostered as a necessary first step in establishing collaborative learning? For example, Nichani (2000) suggests that online learning communities will only work if they are based on ‘strong relationships’ between learners (p. 2). Ebersole (2003) argues that greater attention to building a sense of community in online learning environments will enhance students’ motivation and engagement. And Garrison and Anderson (2003) emphasise the importance of both ‘cognitive independence’ and ‘social interdependence’ in establishing a successful critical community of learners. In their words, ‘the learning community is a fusion of individual (subjective) and shared (objective) worlds’ (p. 23). They go on to argue that establishing a sense of belonging in the learning community through social presence can go some way to countering potential feelings of anomie (p. 49). However, Hodgson and Reynolds (2002) warn against such views of online learning communities, by offering a critique of: ‘the tendency in liberal education to privilege community as a core value’ (p. 120). They argue that a focus on establishing communities for the purpose of democratising education, and reducing alienation and isolation, ignores the effects of unequal power relations within such communities, the conformity required to reach consensus on belonging to a community, and a consequent homogenisation of difference.

Derrida’s critique of community (see Caputo, 1997, pp. 106–109) offers a way of understanding this issue. He argues that the potentially positive idea of community inescapably also contains within it two oppressive ideas. The ideas of sharing in common and belonging, which the word ‘community’ presupposes, suggest a
requirement to homogenise one’s identity, purpose and value in order to be a member. This process would tend to smooth out difference and close off the possibility of openness to what is other, creating a restrictive space in which the possibility for questioning, critique or deconstruction are reduced. In this way, the word ‘community’ can be seen also to presuppose the idea of exclusion: for belonging and sharing in common imply not belonging and not sharing in common. This presupposition implies the drawing of boundaries which delimit and control the approach of the other, keeping otherness and difference at a distance, both within the learning group and outside it. What seems at first glance to be an inclusive and welcoming term contains within it the very opposite.

For Derrida, resistance to the idea of certainty contained in this consensus-based view of community is essential in order to maintain openness to the possibility that the future might bring something which is as yet unimagined or unknown. This may be particularly relevant for the idea of a learning community, whose main purpose may be the construction of the as yet unknown through the encounter with the other of another person, another way of being, another way of understanding.

From this analysis, it seems that establishing learning communities based on consensual belonging risks producing the very alienation which such a strategy might seek to avoid. The following are two examples of experiences of alienation that might arise in online learning communities.

**Example 3:** In Mann (2003a) I offer an account of my own experience as an online learner. I describe the experience of a loss of control over my presentation of self, especially as I feel as if my contributions are posted out into a void of unknown other participants, whose definitions of me I have less control over than in a face-to-face environment. I become unsure as to the norms that are being established in the group, and begin to experience myself as different in relation to my interpretation of these norms. The online learning environment seems to amplify the problem for me of establishing an identity in the learning group, of working out what the norms of the group are, and how I fit into these. It is as if the online learning environment makes it more possible for an ‘architecture of belief’ (Nakamura, 1995) of assumed group norms, values and motivations to take a hold and guide decisions about how to act and respond. In this example, the purpose was to work within an online learning community, and attempts were made by the tutor to establish this through the presentation of individual biographies to the group. In this case, what was of concern, to me at least, was not the issue of belonging, but of clarifying and understanding the different positions taken by other participants so that I could see where I stood within this.

**Example 4:** In another example of an online learning community, Conrad (2002) describes how a group of online adult learners takes great pains to establish a code of etiquette that maintains harmony within the learning group. This leads to an ‘increased sense of inhibition’ (p. 206), which keeps silent ‘beneath the visible surfaces of participation, the nether issues of conflict, captivity and compromise’ (p. 210). In this way, participants could be said to be forging the kind of consensual community of belonging that should support learning, but which has the opposite
effect by inhibiting what may be the necessary challenge and expression of difference required for learning.

Both these online examples seem to offer an echo of the issue of inhibiting assumptions posed by the two conventional learning environment examples described in the introduction above. In Example 3, I am concerned as a learner to work out what the norms governing interaction in the online group are, and in Example 4, an attempt seems to be made to establish ‘etiquette’ norms to harmonise the work of the group, but which prevent the raising of expressions of difference. Though all four examples show the reaching of a kind of ‘consensus’, which could be said to support the building of community, in all cases this consensus comes at the expense of the expression of difference and the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about how to behave. It could even be argued that the complexities of face-to-face communication, rather than being mitigated by the online environment, are actually amplified by it. Firstly, it is a new medium of communication for many people, and may thus be presumed to entail new communication conventions, which may be unequally known. And secondly, as a medium, it reduces the communication cues available to one in order to establish identity and feedback online (Mann, 2003a). In this way, it potentially carries a greater potential for communication breakdown, and hence alienation from the capacity to engage meaningfully in order to pursue individual and group learning agendas.

The four examples seem to illustrate experiences of constraint, inhibition, silencing of talk, unexpressed personal experience, ignorance of the other, conformity to harmony, and a strange feeling as if these different actors are somehow ‘doing it in the dark’. All four examples are characterised by an experience of difference and lack of control, which seem to be exaggerated by the practice of basing actions and interpretations on unexamined assumptions about what is appropriate and normal.

I would argue that implicit in these experiences is a lack of the possibility to communicate, rather than a lack of belonging within a community. Belonging or having a shared purpose do not seem to be at issue. Rather, what seems to be at issue is more concerned with opening up possibilities for expression; seeking understanding; making explicit norms and assumptions in order to question and configure them more appropriately; getting to know the other; checking out different experiences, needs and purposes; voicing different experiences, histories, and positions, and having these accounts heard; receiving response to one’s contributions; raising awareness of privilege and inequality; and acting to mitigate these.

In the next section, I consider the experience of alienation as a failure of communication and draw implications from this for practice.

**A failure of communication**

An alternative way to understand the experience of alienation in the learning environment is to see it as a failure of communication between teachers and learners, and learners and learners. Such a failure might most obviously concern learner misunderstanding of what the teacher is trying to teach and teacher misunderstanding
or ignorance of the learners’ current understandings of this. Less obviously, and perhaps more importantly, it includes a failure on the teacher’s part to be aware of or understand the learners’ experience to the learning environment; their desires, interests and fears within it; their current approach to study and learning; and their understanding of and response to the learning and teaching process. Conversely, it will also include learner ignorance or misunderstanding of the teacher’s purpose; the assumptions behind their approach; and the teacher’s own experience of the learning environment. This perspective suggests the need to focus on the opening up of dialogue between teachers and learners in order to share experience, make explicit assumptions and to variously negotiate purpose, process and content. Without such purposeful communication, both teacher and learners are liable to accommodate to unexamined assumptions about how it is best to be and to act. In this way, they may become caught up in a ‘dynamic of compliance’ to these assumptions, which prevents a lively, purposeful engagement with each other and the work to be done (Mann, 2003b).

What then is it that might inhibit learners and teachers from engaging with each other in order to express, understand and challenge each other’s position, needs, preferences and concerns? Interaction between teachers and learners within particular learning contexts, such as online learning communities and face-to-face seminars, could be defined as a special type of social activity. According to Levinson (1992, p. 69), activity types are: ‘culturally recognized activity … whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions’. He identifies teaching as one such activity type.

This sociocultural view of teaching and learning allows us to see how participants in different teaching and learning situations will make assumptions—on the basis of their definition of the situation—about what roles, behaviour and contributions are appropriate to the particular setting. These norms of behaviour may or may not be shared by all participants; they are likely to remain implicit; and they may exert significant constraint over what it is possible to do in the particular learning and teaching context.

For example, Wisniewski (2000) draws attention to the point that academic practices, such as 50-minute seminars, essays and lectures, and the norms which govern these, are taken to be natural practices in the academy that are not open to challenge. Students and lecturers participate and act in them according to unexamined assumptions about what is normatively appropriate in these different contexts. In this way, according to Grant (1997), the institution exerts a regulatory control over the communicative practices of students and lecturers. As a relatively new academic practice, online learning discussions within online learning communities may draw on some of these naturalized practices as well as being more open to the establishment of new norms. In this way, they may have the potential to be less regulated by the institution. On the one hand, Example 3 described above seems to indicate an openness around norms that made it difficult to engage, whereas Example 4 suggested a compensatory pull towards establishing consensual etiquette norms to support harmony in the group.
This socio-linguistic perspective reminds us that encounters between teachers and learners within face-to-face or online classrooms need to be understood as social and discursive practices (rather than as individual psychological learning processes), which are governed by social, linguistic and discoursal norms. These norms are rarely made explicit, but are assumed by participants so that action and interaction can get under way. What is problematic is that such norms will govern what it is appropriate to talk about in the learning environment; what roles teachers and learners should take; what activities are appropriate; what is to be valued, including the kinds of contributions that can be made; how it is best to learn and to teach; what it is to be a good student, etc. This process is referred to by Barthes (1973) as ‘naturalisation’. What is actually cultural, and therefore potentially open to challenge and change, is perceived as natural and thus unchallengeable.

From this perspective, seminars and online learning discussions can be described as ‘cultural’ or ‘ideological’ practices (Althusser, 1996) which have been (or are in the process of being) naturalised and through which, therefore, particular views of society are presented (not just in terms of content) but most particularly through the ways they are organised and produced (Storey, 1997). These practices form part of the rituals and customs of everyday life, as if they were natural, but which ‘bind’ teachers and learners to the social order. For example, taking as self-evident the view that consensus-based learning communities will support learning and engagement both presupposes a particular view of social organisation and creates practices which potentially inhibit the expression of difference and challenge. Examining the learning environment from the perspective of communication allows one to consider ways in which the social organisation of the learning and teaching context, and the sociocultural norms which govern this, may create conditions which are likely to produce the experience of alienation in learning.

But there seems to be more at stake here than the difficulty of questioning and dialoguing about the weight of tradition of assumed ways of working and being. It seems that issues of identity presentation and construction within the learning group may also be sources of alienation which arise through understanding the classroom communicatively as a place of social, cultural and discursive practice.

This is evident in the significance of ‘being a good student’ in Example 1, and in Example 3 of not knowing what identity others are constructing for one. Perriton and Reedy (2002) describe this sense of not being in control of one’s identity as the: ‘inscription and proscription of identity that arises within the micro-processes of online (and other) communities’ (p. 130); that is, the ways in which the discourse and dynamics of a group can give someone an identity that they have no control over. One of the students in Mann (2003b) asserted, ‘I am not stupid’, against what she considered to be her positioning as such in the learning group, because of her inability to contribute. Remaining silent, which she felt constrained to do by the discursive practices of the particular class, in her view, meant that she was seen as stupid by her peers and teacher. This failure of communication positioned her in a way that she did not intend but felt she had no control over.
According to Breen (2001), all learning and teaching context share a concern with the social as well as with learning. In seeking to avoid some of the difficulties encountered by the social aspects of learning—identity, inclusion/exclusion, conflict, for example—Breen suggests that: ‘learners jointly conspire with teachers in creating and maintaining a manageable working harmony through the particular routines and procedures of the surface text of lessons’ (p. 315). This is illustrated quite neatly in Example 4 where the participants strive to establish harmony through etiquette. Breen argues, furthermore, that understanding the learning environment as a social and cultural space—as well as a learning and pedagogic space—helps us to see that learners use their emerging understanding of the culture of the classroom, and their place within it, to maximise social and learning benefits and minimise potential psychological and social costs. This is itself, however, a potentially alienating process, as it can lead some learners to inhibit their potential and capacity to fully engage: ‘some learners’ perceptions of the established social relationships in some classrooms may actually encourage them to underachieve’ (p. 316).

This is illustrated by all four examples above. Learners seem to be constrained for fear of not being seen to be good; for fear of breaking assumed norms about what is appropriate behaviour; and for fear of potential disharmony in the group. This could be said to arise out of a failure to open up for discussion assumptions about how it is appropriate to behave and communicate; and to share fears and concerns about participating in the learning community.

What I have tried to show in the first part of this section is how one might understand alienation as arising from a failure of communication within the learning community or environment—where such failure is produced through the powerful pull of naturalised norms and assumptions about how to communicate that inhibit questioning and challenge; the potentially ideological nature of particular communicative events within the educational context; the power of the other in shaping the identity of the individual in the group; and a dynamic of compliance which may pull teachers and learners towards a surface form of harmony in order to get through the business of the class without too much damage to oneself.

It seems to me that this analysis suggests a need for ways in which to open up communication and dialogue in the learning community, so that teachers and learners can actually engage with the very real issues that concern them. This implies the necessity of facilitating dialogue in the learning group, rather than seeking to establish a sense of belonging to a learning community. In order to inform how such dialogue might be initiated, the rest of this article assesses the potential for practice of the ideal forms of communication proposed by Habermas, Tutu, Bennett and Said.

**Facilitating dialogue in the learning group**

Habermas offers a theory of communicative action whose aim is reaching mutual understanding and action based on that understanding: ‘talking about things, including ourselves, only has a point if we are serious about it and can at least envision the
possibility of reaching agreement, as autonomous and equal partners in discussion’ (Outhwaite, 1996, pp. 11–12). Such communication depends, according to Habermas, on the basic presuppositions that what the speaker says is true, is sincerely meant and appropriate. For such use of language to meet the criteria of communicative action, these presuppositions have to be open to question (Outhwaite, 1996, pp. 11–12). Thus, if a teacher asks learners to prepare a presentation for an online seminar, the learners have to assume that the teacher is speaking the truth, is sincere, and that the request is appropriate to the norms and conventions of the situation. It must also be possible for learners to question the factuality of the seminar, and the sincerity and appropriateness of the request. There is thus an important emphasis here on openness to challenge.

In Habermasian terms, we could say that the unexamined assumptions upon which classroom processes are based constitute the ‘lifeworld’ (Habermas borrows this term from Husserl, who uses it to refer to the unexamined experience of day-to-day life) of the classroom. That is, they constitute: ‘the unreflective background consensus which constitutes a necessary frame for social interaction’ (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p.84). Although this ‘lifeworld’ makes it possible for the classroom to operate smoothly, by remaining unexamined it potentially closes down the possibility for change and foregrounds the potential for an alienated relationship between teacher and learners. From a Habermasian perspective, the way out of this would be to engage in communicative action towards the rationalisation of the learning community ‘lifeworld’, in such a way as to engage teachers and learners in authentic communication towards mutual understanding and action.

The concept of communicative rationality thus contributes to the possibility of emancipation, and is opposed to what Habermas terms instrumental rationality, whose purpose is the achievement of results rather than understanding, and whose logic is informed by the requirements of the economy and the state. Habermas argues that instrumental rationality has colonised the ‘lifeworld’, which includes the public sphere, through monetarisation and bureaucratisation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; p.86; and Habermas, 1984). So, for example, in the public sphere of education, this colonisation has disturbed the traditional roles of teacher and learner, and introduced the potential new roles of provider, consumer and client. Such changes in roles remain implicit within the assumptions of the ‘lifeworld’, and have the potential to disturb teacher and learner relationships unless actively opened up for critique through dialogue.

As we have seen, however, the conditions that Habermas requires for the ideal of communicative action are not all met in the learning community. There are unequal relationships of power and knowledge between participants; participants’ motives will not always be explicit to each other (including their teachers); and appropriateness of discourse and action are exactly the areas that need to be examined and contested, rather than assumed. The process of argumentation which Habermas’s proposal is based on may not be available to or preferred by all, and Habermas’s aim to arrive at consensus takes us back to the problems of consensual community already discussed above. This view of communication sees difference as unproblematic, as it can be
resolved through rational argumentation working towards a common purpose of achieving understanding and consensus.

Nevertheless, the key contribution that the Habermasian perspective makes to the issue of alienation in the learning environment is the centrality of the idea of opening up the ‘lifeworld’ to question through dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, and the possibility of establishing forms of ideal communication that can lead to greater democratisation.

An alternative to this need to arrive at consensus is most vividly provided by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Krog, 1998; Tutu, 1999). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was founded on the principle that victims of apartheid were given the opportunity to tell their stories, and to hold the hope of reparation, whereas perpetrators would be given amnesty for their crimes so long as they gave a full and truthful account of them. In many cases, this also included offering a public apology for them. In drawing attention to this very particular account of communication, I do not wish to diminish the extraordinary events and suffering of the South African people which led to this approach, nor do I wish to imply that the problems of alienation in education are of the same magnitude. I do, however, think it is worthwhile to consider what can be learnt from the South African experience. Firstly, one of the purposes of the Commission was to achieve understanding; secondly, everyone concerned was given the right and had the space to speak, to be heard and to tell the story of their experience, in the words in which they could tell it; and thirdly, there were no sanctions attached to the public revelation of action and experience. Finally, the founding assumption under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the African idea of ‘ubuntu’, which stresses our common humanity with each other, and the view that an experience that directly dehumanises one person also dehumanises us all. Significant to the ideal of ‘ubuntu’ is reciprocity, generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion and care (Tutu, 1999; p. 34).

Such communicative conditions could most constructively be considered for the learning community: the goal of arriving at mutual understanding (not consensus) of each participant’s position and experience; the right of all members of the learning group to speak and to be heard; the possibility to speak in order to tell the story of one’s experience (not to apportion blame or to convince through argument); the possibility to speak—stumblingly, slowly, in an unprepared and sometimes ‘illogical’ way—without sanction; and finally the assumption that the hurts, setbacks, constraints, difficulties that any one learner or teacher experiences in that classroom are of mutual concern and not simply the responsibility of that individual. What seems to me to be the essence of this approach is the opening up of the possibility to speak and of the possibility to be heard without burdening this ‘conversation’ with the requirement to arrive at a consensus. What is at the heart of this seems to be the assertion of our common humanity, through respect and the provision of a legitimate space for expressing and hearing difference.

This theme is picked up by Bennett (2003), when he argues for conversation and hospitality to be at the heart of the academy. He calls for a practice of ‘vigorous, respectful conversation’ (p. 58) which aims to clarify rather than dominate, and
which holds within it many different voices. In order to clarify this view of such conversation, he quotes Michael Oakeshott (1991, p. 490): ‘different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to each other’. In such a way, there is the possibility of the kind of opening up to the other that Derrida refers to, without closing things down by trying to assimilate and reduce difference to the sameness of the self. This view is also expressed by Edward Said in one of his last essays (Said, 2003), where he argues—in the field of literary criticism—for a return to what he calls the value of humanist critique which seeks to understand what is other or different in a text by: ‘entering into the life of a written text as seen from the perspective of its time and its author’. He argues that this act requires generosity and hospitality in order to make space for the other, as well as a mind historically and rationally attuned to the context of interpretation. This call to an ‘active practice of worldly secular rational discourse’ is not, in his view, a sentimental one. Rather, it is essential in order to resist alienation, hostility and standardisation, all of which reduce and exclude the other.

Conclusion

In an earlier article (Mann, 2003a) I argued for the alienation I experienced in an online classroom to be seen as a failure of community, in the sense that my own behaviour, and perhaps that of others, including the teacher, could be seen to be a failure of ‘taking care’ of the other. I argued for the need to see the learning community as an ethical space: ‘in which teachers and learners have to develop a stance of openness to the other—the other of the teacher, learners, the subject of study itself’. (p. 122). What I have argued for in this article is in many ways a similar thing. I have approached it, however, from the standpoint of communication. Firstly, I have used the focus on communication to help us understand how alienation might arise in the context of the classroom; and secondly, I have proposed some conditions for a form of communication ideal which might help us arrive at the kind of ethical community proposed.

This ideal would combine the critical reflexivity and pursuit of mutual understanding of Habermas; the possibility for the telling of the story of one’s experience without sanction or consequence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the hospitality to the other of Said, Bennett and Oakeshott and the reciprocity and mutuality of common humanity contained in the idea of ‘ubuntu’.

This discussion suggests that a prime focus for reducing the experience of alienation in the learning community has to be on the opening up of communication between learners and between learners and teachers. This opening up of conversation allows the individual participant to have a voice in the learning group and its workings, but this right to voice brings with it a requirement to be open to and have responsibility to the other.

I am conscious, of course, that everything about the nature of communication that I have outlined, as creating the possibility of the experience of alienation in the
learning community, will still be present and militate against the possibility of the ideal proposed.

One response is to withdraw to the status quo; the other response is to remind the teacher of their privilege and power, and to exhort them to use this to engage learners with them in order to transgress the norms of the classroom—whether online or face-to-face—and break out into different forms of communication. As Derrida suggests, we have to act towards justice today, even though it will never come.

References


