Negotiating place, technology and identity - a postmodern narrative of places to meet in a community of practice

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Abstract

In this paper we use autoethnography to trace the way that community, identity and technologies contribute to our sense of place, using vignettes as data for capturing the rich ambiguity of context and the situated nature of our distributed meeting places. Through reflecting on a diverse reading of the literature and our experience we articulate that our shared community, CPsquare, is actually something that gives meaning to our everyday practice rather than being a place that manifests itself as a physical or virtual location for meeting next time. In our analysis we highlight the fluid, intersecting and emergent boundaries of community and the nesting, overlapping and changing timelines that require multiple and divergent uses of technology to designate and design that "next meeting place". We conclude that autoethnography as a method helps us to be both insiders and outsiders in the research process and in our practice, leading us to wonder whether the fluid networked identity should be the unit of our analysis rather than community or place.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Communities of Practice, Identity, Technology, Place, Space

1. Introducing the question: our purpose and context

For nearly a decade we have been experimenting with, and writing about, different designs and technologies for communities. Our analytical framework comes from the concept of "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) and the situated character of learning. Our interest, as researchers and practitioners, is in the way new tools and technologies shape and are shaped by mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. In this inquiry we investigate how the current technical milieu creates a sense of place and shapes our identities in relation to our own practice and community. To help unravel the multiple meanings and layers of our question, "*where do we meet next time?*", we present a research narrative that grounds us in a shared history of a community called *CPsquare* and different but loosely joined identities.

Early writing on distributed communities, such as that of Rheingold's in 1993, focused on the question of whether communities could exist or be formed in "cyberspace." Since then we have seen a growing body of literature on the processes of building distributed communities with related social and technological questions about how "online communities" start and how to support and design for them (see, for example, Preece 2004). Meanwhile the discourse of communities and communities of practice has become

commonplace, appropriated by business and education as instrumental for achieving institutional objectives. The original observation of communities of practice as emergent containers for trajectories of learning identities has given way to "CoPs" being used as instruments for achieving specific purposes such as "sharing knowledge", "e-learning" and "delivering online courses".

A discussion list or web forum is often seen as where distributed communities take *place*. More recently new Internet technologies offer many new tools and ways of connecting, with earlier places for building communities sometimes referred to as "walled gardens." Many communities now operate between and across tools and locations. We also see people simultaneously participating in multiple communities and conversations in their everyday life and making sense of partial conversations in different places. "Small pieces loosely joined", the title Weinberger (2002) used to characterize these new tools and patterns of use, carries meaning beyond the realm of tools and into that of place and identity.

Life in "heterotopias" (Foucault 1994) is an ever more important challenge for individual practice and identity. Multimembership in multiple communities across different tools and platforms becomes a constant challenge both to our individual and collective management of the situation and to our individual and collective identities.

In trying to make sense of these phenomena we find ourselves learning new ways of following individual and collective trajectories and of observing new practices. We have to find new methods and understandings to "do fieldwork" and to deal with subtle boundaries and peripheries.

Though by far the greatest proportion of ethnographic publications still report on bordered physical locations, we are beginning to see the site focus blurring in researchers' experiments with multi-site, multi-team, participatory, distributed, multi-expert, connectivity-based (rather than site-based) kinds of approaches. (Jordan 2008)

In this paper we address these challenges at two levels, in terms of content and in terms of method. On the content level we explore the interactions between place, identity, and technologies from a community of practice perspective. At the heart of this perspective is the experience of meaningfulness and meaning as an experience of everyday life, as developed in Wenger's social theory of learning (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). At a methodological level we apply an autoethnographic methodology promoted by Ellis (2004) for describing and investigating the issues at stake, incorporating an autonarrative on our shared community, an international distributed community of practice loosely gathered around *CPsquare*.

The structure of this paper is as follows: we elaborate our method in section two, locate our investigation in previous research in section three, and present our data in the form of three autoethnographic vignettes in section four. In section five we discuss and analyze the vignettes and in section six we share our conclusions, reflecting on the process of writing an autoethnography as well as on the interrelated issues of

place, identity and technology from a community of practice perspective.

We hope that the results of our investigation and the insights gained could help inform Internet research methodology, community design, and design of community technologies alike.

2. Autoethnography: history, context, and arguments for a methodology

Autoethnography, as practiced and described by Ellis (2004) and others, is an emergent ethnographic writing practice involving highly personalized accounts of dialogue, emotions and experience as the basis of inquiry. It is an experimental form of writing that brings together personal accounts and objective social science methods. Although the methodological exposition and examples of autoethnography mainly focus on the trajectory of an individual rather than a community, the "Community Interlude" in Ellis (2004, 269-283) is an example of the method's potential for exploring underlying dynamics of individual, multiple and collaborative trajectories. We suggest that it could be particularly appropriate for understanding distributed communities of practice and their use of technology.

We first read Ellis' methodological novel "The Ethnographic I" while working together on the role of narrative in community learning (Arnold, Smith, and Trayner 2006). Since then Ellis' ideas about method have become part of our common repertoire. We were fascinated with the convincing link Ellis made between (auto)narrative on the personal and the social and cultural level. This fit neatly with learning theory from a community of practice perspective as well as Holzkamp's (1993) critical psychology theory on learning, which could be seen as an autonarrative on his experience as a schoolboy. When starting our reflections on technologies and designing a place for a distributed community we turned an ethnographic eye on our own distributed community and on ourselves as a distributed research team. We ground our reflections in three autoethnographic vignettes as data, loosely joined by our distributed community *CPSquare* in general, and our research team specifically.

CPsquare is a distributed community of practice on communities of practice that has used different technologies and face-to-face meetings since it started in 2002. Although we are all involved with the community in different ways, we attribute many individual insights to the negotiation of meaning that has taken place in and around this community. To look at CPsquare and our individual cases was thus a way to "to keep our eyes open and look carefully [...] - not in the hope of proving anything but rather in the hope of learning something" (Eysenck 1976, 9).

Using autoethnographic methods to study distributed communities is relatively un-chartered territory. There are no canonical answers to many of the fine-grained questions that came up in the research process. Through whose eyes (and through how many pairs of them) do we think we will see a meaningful part of a

community? How much time and which specific times do we privilege as "observed" (given that the engagement of autoethnographers over a sustained period of time benefits and complicates meaning-making)? What level of detail and sources of data are meaningful in a narrative? And how is non-participation or participation in "other" communities to be included in a focus on "this" community?

Without obvious answers to these questions we decided to use autoethnography as a method. Our question "were do we meet next time" focuses on the practice of using technologies in a community of practice. Vann and Bowker's comments on practice (2002, 6-8) help illustrate why an ethnographic approach is appropriate:

"To study practice is to study a lived-in world. It is to see the reality that the normative model will have missed. It is an ethnographic seeing that does not impose normative reifications and as such sees a kind of pre-reified knowledge-bearing subject. It is to build a new scientific object. The object of this science is practice."

In addition to illuminating the practice of using technologies in distributed communities of practice, we thought that *auto*ethnography, "a reflexive account of one's own experiences situated in culture" (wikipedia, autoethnography 12.09.2008), could help expose a research process with blurred site boundaries, making it subject to reflection and comment. This reflexiveness is a key element of learning and meaning-making in communities of practice so there is a good match between method and "object of study".

3 Community, identity and place in the context of changing technologies – the research that guides us

In 2002 we were part of an international, cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral group of researchers and practitioners that held a Dialogue in Setúbal, Portugal to talk about our work. We came together in a beautiful place and a loose agenda to share a common passion for the idea of social and situated learning in communities of practice. Personal and professional relationships grew from that dialogue, as did new meanings, a shared language and a series of collaborative projects and events. In many ways that Dialogue was one of the places where our community, CPsquare, was born. The themes of community, identity, and technology (all in the context of learning) were in our conversations from the beginning; the idea to meet was formulated online, so we met after we knew each other well through online interactions. The question on how technology could best support a community was always part of our community discourse and of our diverse research activities. At that time and with the technology at hand, *place* was seen either an obstacle to deal with (finding a suitable meeting room or an inexpensive way of talking on the telephone) or a reward (a beautiful place to meet). More than six years later we have grown to

reconsider place as a resource to help organize our thinking about community, identity and technology.

3.1 Community

Our individual and collective thinking about *community* has been greatly influenced by our encounters with Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). For each of us the idea of learning in a community of practice became an organizing concept, a midway notion in which individual practice and larger social structures meet.

Earlier discussions of the concept of "community" had not put the connection with learning or identity first. They were concerned with the *existence* of "community" in the virtual space (Rheingold 1993) and, in contrast to the assumption of German sociologist Tönnies (1887/1963), not necessarily place-bound (Wellman 1999).

The distinguishing characteristic of a community of practice is that it is the location for an "economy of meaning" (Wenger 1998, 209) where the meaning of shared practice is negotiated among participants. Fundamental to this perspective is an understanding that communities of practice are a dynamic interaction of *participation* (action and connection between people that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging) and of *reification* (where a certain understanding of something is given form).

3.2 Identity

It was in this context that the three of us shared a language and a practice for talking about communities of practice in which identity is a central concept. In Lave and Wenger (1991), the concept of legitimate peripheral participation was proposed as the main characteristic of learning. By using ethnographic studies of apprenticeship and learning they sought to broaden the traditional understanding of apprenticeship from a master/student relationship to one of changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice. Unlike apprentices, peripheral members are treated as legitimate participants in a community, and being a legitimate members involves "learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 105). At the Dialogue, Patricia illustrated these thoughts by recounting her story of a late re-entry into academia to do a Ph.D. project and the significance of her peripheral participation in a university research project.

In his 1998 book, "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity", Wenger explored the concepts of identity and community of practice in detail, using them as the main entry points into a social theory of learning. Identity and negotiability of identity is part of the process of taking ownership of meaning.

There was a cross-over from Beverly's early readings in sociolinguistics and multi-literacies where the fragmentary nature of linguistic experience is seen to both reflect and cause the personal fragmented

identity of a postmodern person. Since the 1970s Hymes (1974) and other anthropologists were working in the tradition of ethnography of communication with interaction, social practice and identity as integrating concepts. A milestone in the work of The New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) was the emphasis on the way individuals make use of a complex range of meaning-making resources, constantly transforming their many layered identities as they make sense of "Available Designs" to design and recreate the world afresh.

3.3 Locations: from Space to Place?

Although we chose beautiful surroundings and a remote location for the initial Dialogue in Portugal in 2002, place *as a concept* and different from *space* was not on our agenda. The AoIR conference motto "re-thinking community, re-thinking place" helped us realise how much we had already touched on place and space in our previous research activities on communities and technologies.

The concepts of "space" and "place" were embedded in the way learning management systems used spatial metaphors for navigation and screen design: "desktops", "book shelves", "buildings" and "rooms" were used to orient learners and teachers, providing cues for system use (Arnold 2001). Other metaphors giving a sense of place include discussion forums with names like "café" or "lounge" where a particular kind of interaction is expected to take place. Harrision and Dourish (1996) talk about "the role of place and space in collaborative systems" and the way designers use familiarity with the way our physical environment is organized spatially to enhance orientation and to prevent the "lost in Cyberspace" syndrome.

Harrision and Dourish's paper also ground our intuitively felt difference between "place" and "space" more precisely. They talk of *space* as the three-dimensional environment that we live in as a structure of our world whereas *place* is a space "*which is invested with understandings of behavioral appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth. We are located in 'space', but we act in 'place'* " (Harrision & Dourish 1996, 4, original emphasis). Furthermore, the same space can be used as different places. It is place that carries social meaning – or as Ciolfi (2004, 2) puts it, place is "*inextricably linked with the wealth of human experiences and use occurring within it.*" One person's space is another person's place.

We felt surprisingly at home with these authors even though we did not have many literature references in common. When we realized that "situated" and "contextual" could be understood as "placed," the connection become more obvious. The fundamental importance of situatedness has scaffolded our thinking and our practice for a long while.

Having made those connections, an important question remains unanswered: How does a space become a meaningful place for individual users, working groups or a community? In other words, how can we design for a sense of place and how can we combine different media spaces in ways that help to create a place?

Up to now we have not discovered any clear-cut answers to this question. There are Harrison & Dourish' design rubrics (1996), Preece's guidelines (2004) or strategies recommended by Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003). But with the growing numbers of tools that support collaboration without user registrations or clearly defined boundaries, such as in open wiki projects, or embedding one piece of code to appear across different tools, or the use of feeds across platforms, their advice and these design questions become more problematic. When does a space, or a configuration of spaces, become a meaningful place for individuals, communities or constellations of communities?

4. Autoethnographies – three vignettes as data basis

Patricia.

"Place matters *now*," Patricia mutters as she grabs her notebook on her way out to the garden from her rather small study. In the summer, the lush green trees that surround her office make it dark as well. On the other hand, working outside has the disadvantage that you can't connect to the Internet.

Munich is her temporary home, where work is, and where she and her partner live while their son is in a high school program in Argentina. When all three of them lived in Hamburg, the light issue didn't seem to be so important – and the sun is usually more generous to the south of Germany anyway.

Fortunately she had already downloaded some student assignments that need to be marked so she has a good excuse to sit outside. On the other hand this week is the last week of an online, Blackboard-based module that she teaches.

"So, should I stay outside," Patricia wonders, "marking papers, instead of joining my students in the debate online?" Her dependency on Internet access is increasing, as her teaching is increasingly online. Somehow, at this point, attending to contributions in Moodle or the accompanying wiki seems even more urgent than the discussions taking place in Blackboard. Combining Moodle and a wiki in one course has turned out to be somewhat cumbersome but she has not found a better solution yet: according to copyright law she needs a protected virtual space like a course on Moodle to be able to provide her students with extracts of copyrighted material; on the other hand the school teachers that cooperate as partners in this particular course need to have easy access and the possibility of being able to contribute to the growing pool of resources on e-learning in schools that this project course is about. "Too many learning management systems" she murmurs to herself – not only because she has to leave her quiet sunny garden. More often than not, there is little true engagement in all those forums… There must be a better way of implementing the vision of a "digital university" that is hyped these days by universities steering committees …

When she finishes marking the batch of assignments, she prepares to go into her dark study again. She feels better when she considers that soon enough all these different online learning systems will at least make it easier to fit working in Munich with her family life in Hamburg. As she climbs up the stairs, another absurdity in Germany's educational system crosses her mind: with all the talk about the "unified European university space" her son can't transfer from a north German state to one in the south without his school career being seriously jeopardized. "Place matters now, indeed."

Back at her desk and re-connected to the Internet, she scans through various windows into the interactions that are taking place on all the different systems. Suddenly, a Skype message pops up telling her that her son has come back online. It seems like a strange time of day, given the time difference between Munich and Buenos Aires, but never mind. She writes a greeting, continuing their chat from yesterday. The quick response, in Spanish, from Enrico345 who neither knows German nor her son, tells her that he must have left his account open when he was using Skype in an Internet café – again! Formulating a quick explanatory answer to the unknown person in the Internet café in her rusty Spanish is a lot easier than the comment she was about to compose on Bronwyn's recent blog post. A comment in English, visible to the whole world, in a community where the majority of people are native speakers still causes her to feel somewhat uneasy.

In contrast, the Skype call which is scheduled for tonight is different: it is a research conversation in English with Beverly and John (who are both native speakers but who are friends as well). The conversation is informal and the notes they take together are only shared within their little group and are not public. Only the conversation has to take place in her study again. Perhaps she should put "providing wifi in her garden" on the to-do-list, she wonders.

Beverly.

Bev is sitting round the table with a group of social change activists that she has been supporting. They have chosen these few days in rural Portugal for a get-together for people from different groups and places – from the north, south, east, and west of Portugal. It is a dynamic group and facilitating such locally contextual conversations in Portuguese can be quite challenging.

It is getting late and they are now one hour into what could be a long discussion of tomorrow's work agenda. Some of them want to use the World Café method (which they call "Tertúlia") a technique for exploring ideas Bev used with them in their last meeting. Others are not sure. The irony of their earlier comments that it's only possible to organize things efficiently when you are face-to-face is a bit distracting. She steals a peek at her watch thinking about her next meeting on another project on Skype: she's still not

prepared and it starts soon. It's scheduled for late in the day because it involves someone from West Coast of the US and another from Brussels to plan an upcoming three-day workshop in Berlin.

Finally the discussion of the group in the room ends with people agreeing to get back together after dinner to do the final preparations for the meeting tomorrow. Beverly excuses herself and goes to her room to prepare for her Skype call. Internet doesn't work in her room, but luckily she has a dongle which she plugs into her Mac. She first opens the MSN chat with her daughter Jess, who works in prison theatre in Manchester. They usually have it open all the time, just to touch base, even when her daughter is working on a very different time zone in Brazil. Recently, they've been having long conversations on MSN because Jess has a problem she is worrying over. She named the prison in a post on her blog and wants her mother's angle on some conflicting thoughts she has about taking the post down after a conversation with the prison director.

Bev also leaves two other Skype chats open: one for a workshop she is organizing with eleven other CPsquare members from US, Europe and Australia; another for her conversations with developers on a platform she is working on. She knows DavidR, the developer in Setúbal, Portugal through Setúbal bloggers events, but neither of them have met DavidB from Austin, Texas, although they have been working together intensely for over a year now. Most of the time she just listens in to the conversations to keep up, and she is there if they need input from her. She notices on Plazes (a social geo-location application) that DavidR is still at the office. Usually he's gone home by now, but she supposes he must be working late on his other project.

Just as she gets to her room someone from the group calls up to her. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Esmerelda says. "It's not good to stay alone in." "I'll be fine" says Bev hoping there'll be enough time this evening to read at least a paragraph or two of a book that John had sent to her unannounced a few months ago. She used to be an avid reader, "book-worm" to her family, but her busy life has taken over and reading is a luxury. "<Sigh>" she writes in Twitter, "when will I ever read? When will I ever read again?" A tweet comes right back: "@bevtrayner What are you doing now?" "OK, OK. I'm reading twitter" she says aloud.

Scanning her email, she spots one from the director of a large NGO for which she's done quite a bit of work in the past two years. "Oh, it's a referral!" she guesses, based on the subject line, and opens it. Dr. Caseres says that he was speaking with a colleague about the community of practice project that Beverly has been supporting and the colleague thinks he would like to have one, too. It looks like the colleague has a large budget **and** (of course) a big deadline. Beverly replies that she can't talk tomorrow unless it's during the morning coffee break.

Five minutes before her meeting and she sits cross-legged on the bed and props up her back with pillows. The curtains are slightly open and outside it's totally dark, the Milky Way fully exposed in this rural part of Portugal. It is still morning for her work partner in US and post-dinner for the person in Brussels who eats early - each one of them together at the same and different places.

John.

The streets are pretty empty when John walks his dog at 6:15 am. The homeless couple that camps by a nearby church entrance is still sleeping while their well-trained dog watches. After breakfast, he sits down to work in his home office as his wife goes to work: a lot to do today, but no big workshop or project to run. He works on emails that came in overnight, jotting down "to-do's" in his composition book. There is a list of "thank-you" emails to send to people who helped during last night's presentation about Web 2.0 tools at a local OD community gathering. Need to edit the slides and post them on Slideshare.com he notes.

During the 8 am meeting with Beverly and Patricia they talk shop before focusing on writing the paper and their deadline. They decide to make their literature review "personal," reflecting on how it's shaped their practice, rather than trying to write something comprehensive, which is nearly impossible given their widely divergent reading. They agree on a deadline for sharing draft autoethnographic vignettes. After the call he finds that they had used two Skype chat windows so he interleaves them using the time stamps. He didn't send the chat transcript in an email until mid-afternoon.

During his next meeting, planning a two-day workshop with Rebecka, they use the phone, a Skype chat (for notes and to check whether there was time to get a cup of coffee), and Writeboard for a draft of the meeting plan. They had developed work methods and content interests during a CPsquare conference 6 months ago, and it's a struggle to deal with the workshop sponsor's requirement for "lots of content."

Afterwards he tries to answer more email, but is interrupted by Lauren, who is asking for her Web Crossing password. She is persevering as John didn't reply to her email two days ago. She's trying to find the email address of a new CPsquare member who presented at a recent phone conference. The exchange leads to a scheduling discussion: Lauren had previously proposed a mentoring session with two new community leaders in her company, to talk about job scope and leadership strategies. They negotiate a time and within minutes Lauren sends an Outlook meeting request message: very handy, thinks John.

Overlapping that IM session is one with his wife Nancy who's across the river. She brags about her new 22" flat-screen computer monitor. They exchange messages off and on during the next 35 minutes, comparing lunch plans, discussing end-of-the day schedules, and completing a shopping list (John runs upstairs to verify that they need milk). Noon approaches and John ends the chat for a meeting with a client.

Fortunately the hour-long teleconference with Debra and her community support team began a couple minutes late. As the support team gathers around a speakerphone in her office, John scans the report that is the subject of this meeting. It describes a set of interviews with community members who had been together for a three-day meeting in Indianapolis a month ago and the group asks him to summarize it. He closes his eyes and concentrates, giving a spontaneous mini-lecture about the interviews he conducted for the report and about community evaluation methodology.

After lunch and a nap he remembers to gather together the notes and audio recordings from yesterday's CPsquare meeting so that people who did not show up could listen to it. He logs on to Web Crossing, retrieves the whole chat transcript, discards the old parts, and cleans it up. He finds the audio recording on the phone bridge, saves a copy on his hard drive for an automatic back-up, and puts a link to it together with the chat room transcript in the CPsquare discussion space. Looking at his watch he see it's already time for the dog's afternoon walk.

5.   Discussion – Comprehensive commentary and analysis

These three vignettes help us develop a broader picture of the place where the *CPsquare* community resides. They show three people straddling in-between spaces: countries, regions, languages, projects, upstairs and downstairs, light and dark. We see three people making sense of the ongoing fluidity and multiplicity of belonging to and engaging in and *in between* different communities and places in their daily lives. This fluid and multiple nature of our identities across different communities means that place is a more complex design question than it was when work was more segmented and place-bound.

In this section, we consider the three vignettes in more detail tracing the patterns of the "multiplicity, heterogeneity, difference, and ceaseless becoming" (Schrag 1997, 7-8) of three members of the CPsquare community.

Place boundaries: fluid, intersecting and emergent

"Places" that come into existence by using technologies seem to introduce new boundaries that overlay existing ones in daily life in remarkably complex interactions. When Beverly's group decides where to meet, she requires a fast internet access in her physical location of rural Portugal to connect her to the other "places" that make up her life. The group's belief that a face-to-face meeting is the pre-eminent place for making decisions is no longer uncontested. It may look like Beverly is alone in her room while they go out together for dinner, but she sees herself in, out, and at the intersections of several different places at once. Patricia crosses boundaries that are physical, technologically mediated, and social.   Among other places we

see her moving between darker inside and brighter outside physical places, homes in Munich and Hamburg, Bavarian and European educational spaces, synchronous and asynchronous conversations, languages, work-oriented and family-oriented roles, and across levels of formality that range from an unscripted response in Spanish to carefully composed contributions in English. John closes his eyes to avoid the distractions of his work place and more fully enter "the place" inhabited by his client and their community.

All those boundaries crossed in the course of one day seem apparently unremarkable. Crossing them (or contemplating their crossing) seems inherently social, since each side of each boundary provides access to other people and other learning. These inner dialogues about each boundary, the self-awareness and self-monitoring that permeate their lives in that learning process are new forms of sociability and self-design. They also raise significant privacy issues. How do prison security requirements intersect with the public blog that Bev's daughter writes? What assurance does Patricia have that the conversations with her son stay private between them? The emergence of new public spaces based on technologies with an open architecture forces us to deal with issues of privacy and confidentiality afresh. Whereas learning management systems had standard settings for privacy so that only registered users could access conversations, new Internet technologies and tools for communities are often built on a "radical trust" (O'Reilly 2005) model, publishing private thoughts and actions widely. Degrees of privacy need to be negotiated with these new tools and defining the right level privacy becomes a time-consuming and culturally embedded challenge.

Place locations: partial, socially constructed and glimpsing

We find ourselves glimpsing places as part of our coping strategy and as part of leadership. Places are emergent and once we have caught sight of them as a reification (for example as a platform) they can lead to new forms of participation, which then leads to new formations of spaces and places. Our practice of taking collective chat notes during teleconferences emerged in CPsquare as a means of self-documenting meetings and of turning telephone conversations into written text for supporting or contesting what was said by anyone on the call. John, who is the community coordinator for CPsquare, holds that practice and spreads it beyond the boundaries of CPsquare itself.

The static and mute spaces afforded by technology (such as forums and Moodle spaces) present opportunities that persist indefinitely over time, while places (such as Patricia's debate with students in Moodle or the Skype chat with her son) emerge in time. They seem to be visible at a given point but disappear at others.

Space may also be visible by inspection as anyone can inspect a tool or browse a page, but seeing a place means being part of the social fabric that creates it, having access to the specific styles of participation that

give it meaning. In this way connectivity opens many virtual layers to a given location and even seems to be able to change its very nature: from a secluded location that enables focus and concentration it can change to a place where concepts, identities and tasks are negotiated. Whether these different sites become a "place" for people's interaction seems to depend more on the interaction occurring than on the property of any given location.

Timelines and places: nesting, overlapping and changing

Directly connected to the additional virtual layers of locations are different time horizons and attention spans in all three vignettes. In Bev's day, for example, all time horizons are involved as she quickly moves from participating in one activity in a given moment to shorter and long-term planning. Her time line seems to be made up of nesting time frames, ranging from the book she is trying to read, to the twitter screen. Equally changing is the attention span: continual partial attention over long periods (a Skype chat that runs for many weeks) occurs at the same time as scanning through her emails.

These overlapping time-lines also blur the distinction between work and social life. The separation between times and places for "work" and "not-work" are not always easy to define. Skype and instant messengers mean that conversations with John's wife, Beverly's daughter and Patricia's son can take place during work hours, just as it becomes practical for Bev's working meetings to cross time zones and take place at night. In all the vignettes there is an overlapping of private and professional conversations which were once characteristic of informal chat in a shared office. John takes a nap between meetings, Beverly lies on the bed for her meeting, and Patricia sits in the garden for her class. All of them can now happen at any time, partly because they are invisible to each other.

For CPsquare, this overlapping of timelines and places suggest that constructing a picture or a snapshot of a community or an event is a way for it to make sense of itself and be meaningful for its members. Conferences such as the AoIR and EPIC conferences that are held at the same time in Copenhagen become opportunities to create new community places that bring people together and serve as a historical reference point afterwards. Reporting and reifying these events become part of the creation of the community as a place.

Technology: multiple and divergent – and time-consuming

Although the resources available to distributed communities are richer and more numerous, the hegemony that the web-based "community platforms" once enjoyed as "the place to meet" has eroded. CPsquare, for example, owes its current existence to common experiences on community platforms. But today, "small pieces, loosely joined," (Weinberger 2002) describes the working environment of individuals and

communities, even if people like Dr. Caseres or university administrators still use "platform," "community of practice" and "learning community" interchangeably. The various spaces and systems that Patricia uses were designed separately but they are integrated by printing on paper, by simultaneous use, by alternating use, by collective agreements. People make sense of the remarkably divergent systems we have available but not without a considerable investment of time and energy. Connecting those small pieces is often something that individuals have to work at as they deal with different tools and different platforms, with the linking methods becoming part of the way place is constructed. Learning how to combine or differentiate technologies is not typically on any school curriculum, nor part of anyone's job description, but is essential to participating across many communities of practice and integral to our quest of deciding where to meet for writing a paper or organising a project together.

Place design: small-scale choices, collective, incremental

A secondary consequence of choosing a tool is that it contributes to a collective design process. We can choose for ourselves, but to succeed with the intended outcome, others need to make corresponding choices to be in the right place, often at the right time. Patricia's choices about how to engage with her students are emblematic of the many small-scale choices that create a collectively designed place (Fischer 2002). We have many more choices to make on a daily basis such as where to sit, which project to focus on, how open to be in a seemingly private space (like Skype). We have varying degrees of influence over each of the places in our social landscape (for example Patricia has little influence over her University's choice of Blackboard, and a lot of influence over the debate in Moodle). Bev's heterotopic experience of place is different from the group who only meet face-to-face. Her "invisible" places to meet is an ongoing part of a collective design process spanning other groups she belongs to which easily gets lost in talk of tools or "what's best" to people whose design relies on a single meeting place. John is totally absorbed in the social processes of his work, moving between different people, tools and projects calculating the value of fleeting transactions to the larger community as he construes it. What often looks like one-off decisions about place in one community meeting may in fact be contributions to a collective design.

Identity: partial membership, multiple communities

All three vignettes describe constellations of different places, multimembership and different states of belonging to different communities.   Taking Patricia's case, the Bologna process (which aims to reform European higher education) promotes a policy of reducing the importance of location.   Nevertheless, implementing reform at a given university underscores the importance of place through local practice and local regulations, such as the laws in Bavaria. Working simultaneously with different sets of international

and geographically dispersed individuals and groups is a part of Bev's day-to-day professional and personal life.

CPsquare may be a "second community" for many of its members but being a second (or third or fourth) community is the norm as people participate in more communities and use more tools for meeting up across those communities. An individual's concern is how to manage their partial membership in a constellation of communities.

6 Conclusions: where do we go from here

In this paper we used autoethnography to trace the way that community, identity and technologies contribute to our sense of place, with vignettes as data for capturing the rich ambiguity of context and the situated nature of our distributed meeting places. We used our individual and shared narratives to build partial pictures of three members of CPsquare who use different tools and technologies as they go about their daily lives. The autonarratives are of three people who look like they are alone, but as we focus more closely on their stories we see them managing their different professional and private identities across borders that include places, tools, and times

Through reflecting on a diverse reading of the literature and our own experience we have realized that our shared community, CPsquare, is actually something that gives meaning to our everyday practice rather than being a place that manifests itself as a physical or virtual location for meeting "next time." In our analysis of the vignettes we came to see the fluid, intersecting and emergent boundaries of community and the consequent partial, socially constructed nature of place locations. The nesting, overlapping and changing timelines seem to require multiple and divergent uses of technology which together contribute to the small-scale and incremental choices that make up our collective design process of that next meeting place.

What are the implications for community design? It suggests that we need to pay attention to individual trajectories across different places and patterns of migration. Our attention needs to be on the overlaps and peripheries as people copy, borrow, imitate, and reinterpret ways of behaving in the process of developing practices and constructing identities. Fluid networked identity may be the unit of analysis rather than community or place. Instead of looking at place we need to be focusing on a landscape of places, where identities are being constructed and practices are evolving across an entire landscape. Learning is constantly creating new localities that are reconfiguring the landscape of places for "meeting next time." We need to be refining our language for talking about this when asked to develop a place for a community of practice from the likes of Dr. Caseres, or to provide a place for a learning community by university

administrators, or to evaluate a community by a funding agency.

If the borders for community and the places where people meet are fuzzy, then how would we encapsulate "the field" and participants for our fieldwork in any future research endeavor? How do we delineate the complex borders of constantly evolving networks? In this paper we have tried to move away from the role of omniscient narrator to describe the field and to incorporate the *rich ambiguity* referred to by Nietzsche (1882/1974). Autoethnography has turned out to be a fruitful method for our inquiry, it helped us especially as a way of being both insiders and outsiders, to consider concrete problems that matter in our local, national, and global communities. However, this method came at a cost as we had to make ongoing individual and collective design decisions about the investigation while also juggling projects and family life. The process of playing out our identities as researchers, practitioners and family members in these different and overlapping aspects of our work and personal life is open-ended, contingent and part of who we are as well as what we are studying.

In conclusion we have managed to make initial connections between some of the current discourse of post-modernity and the highly contextual stories of our everyday lives. There is still more work to be done to better understand the connections between people, their activities in a given place, and the impact and shaping of tools. The task used to be easier when there was a uniformity of time, geography or the concreteness of physical things. A next step for us to take consists of exploring visual and other ways to represent the fluidity and in-between spaces of community(ies), place(s) and identity(ies) and to develop a better language for describing that landscape of places to meet.

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