

1 community

2 *What is community and why should educators be concerned with it? We explore the development of theory around community, and the significance of boundaries, social networks and social norms - and why attention to social capital and communion may be important.*

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Since the late nineteenth century, 'the use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages' (Elias 1974, quoted by Hoggett 1997: 5). Before 1910 there was little social science literature concerning 'community' and it was



really only in 1915 that the first clear sociological definition emerged. This was coined by C. J. Galpin in relation to delineating rural communities in terms of the trade and service areas surrounding a central village (Harper and Dunham 1959: 19). A number of competing definitions of community quickly followed. Some focused on community as a geographical area; some on a group of people living in a particular place; and others which looked to community as an area of common life.

Beyond this there are issues around the way 'community' appears in political discourse. For some it might mean little more than a glorified reworking of the market. For others, it may be a powerful organizing ideal (such as those concerned with advancing the [communitarian](#) agenda). Here we will focus on understandings within social theory - and ask why should educators be interested in them?

Approaching the theory of community

It is helpful to begin by noting that community can be approached as a value (Frazer 2000: 76). As such it may well be used to bring together a number of elements, for example, solidarity, commitment, mutuality and trust. It comes close to the third of the ideals that were inscribed on many of the banners of the French Revolution – fraternity (the others, as you will most likely remember, were liberty and equality).

Socialists such as William Morris talked similarly of 'fellowship':

Fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death; and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake ye do them. (*A Dream of John Ball*, Ch. 4; first published in *The Commonwealth* 1886/7)

Community can also be approached as a descriptive category or set of variables (see below). In practice the two are entwined and often difficult to separate (Frazer 2000: 76).

Here we will initially explore community in three different ways (after Willmott 1986; Lee and Newby 1983; and Crow and Allen 1995). As:

Place. Territorial or place community can be seen as where people have something in common, and this shared element is understood geographically. Another way of naming this is as 'locality'. This approach to community has spawned a rich literature – first in 'community studies' and more recently in locality studies (often focusing on spatial divisions of labour).

Interest. In interest or 'elective' communities people share a common characteristic other than place. They are linked together by factors such as religious belief, sexual orientation, occupation or ethnic origin. In this way we may talk about the 'gay community', the 'Catholic community' or the 'Chinese community'. Development in what might be called the sociology of identity and *selfhood* have played an important role in 'opening out the conceptual space within which non-place forms of community can be understood' (Hoggett 1997: 7). 'Elective groups' and 'intentional communities' (ranging, according to Hoggett *op cit* from cyber-communities to car-boot enthusiasts) are a key feature of contemporary life

Communion. In its weakest form we can approach this as a sense of attachment to a place, group or idea (in other words, whether there is a 'spirit of community'). In its strongest form 'communion' entails a profound meeting or encounter – not just with other people, but also with God and creation. One example here would be the Christian communion of saints – the spiritual union between each Christian and Christ (and hence between every Christian). Another is Martin Buber's interest in meeting and 'the between'.

There is, of course, a strong possibility that these different ways of approaching community will also overlap in particular instances. Place and interest communities may well coincide – for example in the case of places where many of those who live there work in the same industry – such as was the case in 'mining villages'. Willmott (1989) argues that it is legitimate to add a third understanding of community – that of attachment – as communities of place or interest may not have a sense of shared identity.

Anthony P. Cohen's (1982; 1985) work around belonging and attachment is a great help in this respect. He argues that communities are best approached as 'communities of meaning'. In other words, "community" plays a crucial symbolic role in generating people's sense of belonging' (Crow and Allan 1994: 6). The reality of community, Cohen argues, lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture (a significant element of this is what Putnam calls 'social capital' – see below). "People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity' (Cohen 1985: 118). This, and the above discussion, leads us to three key questions:

- How is one community or communion marked off from another?
- What sort of social networks or systems are involved in a particular grouping or encounter?
- What norms or 'habits' are involved?

Boundary and community

Cohen argues that 'community' involves two related suggestions that the members of a group have something in common with each other; and the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups (Cohen 1985: 12). Community, thus, implies both similarity and difference. It is a relational idea: 'the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities' (op. cit.). This leads us to the question of boundary – what marks the beginning and end of a community?

Cohen's argument is that boundaries may be marked on a map (as administrative areas), or in law, or by physical features like a river or road. Some may be religious or linguistic. However, not all boundaries are so obvious: 'They may be thought of, rather, as existing in the minds of the beholders' (Cohen 1985: 12). As such they may be seen in very different ways, not only by people on either side, but also by people on the same side. This is the *symbolic* aspect of community (or communion) boundary and is fundamental to gaining an appreciation of how people experience communities (and communion). An obvious example of this is the sorts of ritual people connect with in terms of religious observance, for example, the rites of worship, the objects involved and the actions of the priest, imam or rabbi. Indeed, it is very significant that the notion of community recurs in major religions:

... the Christian ideal of the communion of saints and the congregation and the Eucharist as forms of community; the centrality of *umma* or community in Islamic traditions and contemporary practice and theology; community is prominent theme in Judaism, and in Buddhism. (Confucianism is not, of course, a religion, but neo-Confucianism is closely intertwined with Buddhism and with traditional religious cults of the family and ancestors, and Confucian norms of family and community life are politically significant in many contemporary contexts. (Frazer 1999: 24)

Each has expression has its own symbols and markers of boundaries defining who is 'in communion' or 'in community', and who is not. The defining of a boundary places some people within, and some beyond the line. The definition of 'community' or 'communion' can, thus, become an exclusionary act. The benefits of belonging to a particular group are denied to non-members. A very obvious example of this is the growth of 'gated communities' in the USA and UK. A physical barrier is erected to keep out, in this case, those who are poor or who are seen as a threat (Blakely and Snyder 1997).

Community as network and local social system

As Lee and Newby (1983: 57) point out, the fact that people live close to one another does not necessarily mean that they have much to do with each other. There may be little interaction between neighbours. It is the nature of the relationships between people and the [social networks](#) of which they are a part that is often seen as one of the more significant aspects of 'community'.

When people are asked about what 'community' means to them, it is such networks that are most commonly cited. 'For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends. Beyond that perimeter lie work, church, neighbourhood, civic life, and [an] assortment of other "weak ties"' (Putnam 2000: 274). As well as helping us to build a sense of self and individuality, such informal relationships 'also enable us to navigate our way around the demands and contingencies of everyday living' (Allan 1996: 2). In a very influential study, Bott (1957: 99) argued that the immediate social environment of urban families was best considered, 'not as the local area in which they live, but rather as the network of actual social relationships they maintain, regardless of whether these are confined to the local area or run beyond its boundaries'. For many social scientists, the idea of 'network' was attractive because it could be mapped and measured. Writers like Stacey (1969) gave up on community as a 'non-concept' and instead explored local social systems.

The 'connectedness' (or density) (and other qualities) of social networks help explain or, at least describe, key aspects of people's experiences.

An example of what analyzing networks can tell us is provided by Wenger's study of the support received by older people in North Wales (1984; 1989; 1995 and discussed by Allan 1996: 125-6). She looked at the changing composition of networks using three criteria: the availability of close kin; the level of involvement of family, friends and neighbours; and the level of interaction with voluntary and community groups. As a result she identified five types of support network. The commonest form was the second followed by the first – and tended to be the most 'robust' in terms of providing people with informal support (Allan 1996: 126)

Wenger on support networks for older people

Wenger identified five types in her study:

- *the local family-dependent support network*. This mainly relied on close kin, who often shared a household or lived locally.
- *the locally integrated support network*. This typically consisted of local family, friends and neighbours.
- *the local self-contained support network*. Usually restricted in scale and containing mainly neighbours, this form had relatively little kin involvement.
- *the wider community-focused support network*. Involving a high level of community activities, this form also typically entailed a high number of friends and kin.
- *the private restricted support network*. Characterized by an absence of close kin, aside from a spouse in some cases, this 'type' also meant few friends or neighbours.

The nature of the networks within in particular place or grouping is, thus, of fundamental importance when making judgments about 'communities' – and the extent to which people can flourish within them. Humans are social animals. Connection and interaction both widen and deepen what we can achieve, and makes possible our individual character. It may even emerge as 'communion' (see below).

There are strong forces working against the formation and health of local social systems. Increasingly we operate across significant distances (for example, via letters, the telephone and the internet) when dealing with financial matters such as banking, shopping and the payment of bills (Beck 1992; Giddens 1984). The various forces linked to [globalization](#) (commodification, marketization and the corporatization) have led to significant shifts in the locus of power. Governments (whether local or national) have become increasingly market-driven. 'It is not just that governments can no longer "manage" their national economies', Colin Leys (2001: 1) comments, 'to survive in office they must increasingly "manage" national politics in such a ways as to adapt them to the pressures of trans-national market forces'. This has entailed two particular dynamics: a growing centralization in key areas of policymaking in many countries (with local agencies having to meet to centrally-determined targets with regard to the way in which they work and the outcomes they achieve); and a hugely increased presence of commercial enterprises in local services with the obvious consequence of an erosion of democracy and the notion of there being public goods.

The combined impact of this movement is a drive towards encouraging people to view themselves as consumers of services (rather than participants) and an associated move towards individualization from more collective concerns. In this situation, as Zygmunt

Bauman (2001: 3) has commented, we may well look longingly at the notion of 'community - it is the 'kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us - but which we would dearly love to inhabit and which we hope to repossess'. However, in a world where market ideologies have become dominant and infused all areas of life, we have increasingly lost a sense of working together to make change.

Insecurity affects us all, immersed as we all are in a fluid and unpredictable world of deregulation, flexibility, competitiveness and endemic uncertainty, but each one of us suffers anxiety on our own, as a private problem, an outcome of personal failings and a challenge to our provide *savoir-faire* and agility. We are called, as Ulrich Beck has acidly observed, to seek biographical solutions to more systematic contradictions; we look for individual salvation from shared troubles. That strategy is unlikely to bring the results we are after, since it leaves the roots of insecurity intact; moreover it is precisely this falling back on our individual wits and resources that injects the world with the insecurity we wish to escape. (Bauman 2001: 144)

It was this over-focus on private troubles (as against public issues) that was a central feature of C. Wright Mills' work - and his argument that we to retain an appreciation of both, and the relationships between them, retains its power.

Community - norms and habits

Whether people are disposed to engage with one another is dependent upon the norms of a particular society or community – and the extent to which individuals make them what de Tocqueville, writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, called 'habits of the heart' (1994: 287) – and this leads us back to our initial discussion of community as a value. To judge the quality of life within a particular community we, need to explore what shared expectations there are about the way people should behave – and whether different individuals take these on.

Three linked qualities appear with some regularity in discussions of communal life:

Tolerance – an openness to others; curiosity; perhaps even respect, a willingness to listen and learn (Walzer 1997: 11).

Reciprocity – Putnam (2000) describes generalized reciprocity thus: 'I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return, and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour'. In the short run there is altruism, in the long run self-interest.

Trust – the confident expectation that people, institutions and things will act in a consistent, honest and appropriate way (or more accurately, 'trustworthiness' – reliability) is essential if communities are to flourish. Closely linked to norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement (Putnam 1993; Coleman 1990), social trust – trust in other people – allows people to cooperate and to develop. Trusting others does not entail us suspending our critical judgment – some people will be worthy of trust, some will not.

One of the fascinating things about these qualities is that in a very important sense such expectations do not need to be imposed upon people. As Matt Ridley (1997: 249) put it, 'Our minds have been built by selfish genes, but they have been built to be social, trustworthy and cooperative'. He continues:

Humans have social instincts. They come into the world equipped with predispositions to learn how to cooperate, to discriminate the trustworthy from the treacherous, to commit themselves to be trustworthy, to earn good reputations, to exchange goods and information, and to divide labour... Far from being a universal feature of animal life, as Kropotkin believed, this instinctive cooperativeness is the very hallmark of humanity and what sets us apart from other animals. (Ridley 1997: 249)

To this extent, the cultivation of reciprocity, honesty and trust is less about building alien institutions and structures, than creating the conditions for their emergence.

Self-interest may bring people together, but in interaction something else emerges. 'Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed, only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another' (de Tocqueville: 515).

Fostering community - social capital

Here I want to suggest that a sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks (and the relationships of trust etc. that are involved) can bring significant benefits. However, as we have seen, the sense of attachment and quality of social networks varies greatly between the different 'communities' that people name. It could be argued that we should be focusing on enhancing the quality of social networks etc. rather than the creation or strengthening of 'community'. (This is the line taken by writers such as Stacey 1969). As a way of appreciating the possibilities here I want to look at the idea of **social capital** – and Putnam's (2000) impressive exploration and compilation of evidence concerning its health and benefits. From there I want to return to the idea that in meeting with others there is the possibility of communion – and that this is, for many, a highly desirable goal.

The notion of **social capital** is a useful way of entering into debates about civil society – and it is central to the arguments of Putnam and others who want to 'reclaim public life'. (See Beem 1999 for a discussion and critique of Putnam et al.) This is how Putnam (2000: 19) introduces the idea:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

In other words, interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric (Beem 1999: 20).

Putnam marshals an impressive amount of material to demonstrate that:

Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. Trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community have far reaching effects on their opportunities and choices, and hence on their behaviour and development (ibid.: 296-306)



Public spaces in high social-capital areas are cleaner, people are friendlier, and the streets are safer. Traditional neighbourhood "risk factors" such as high poverty and residential mobility are not as significant as most people assume. Places have higher crime rates in large part because people don't participate in community organizations, don't supervise younger people, and aren't linked through networks of friends. (ibid.: 307-318)

Economic prosperity. A growing body of research suggests that where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighbourhoods, and even nations prosper

economically. Social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. (ibid.: 319-325)

Health. There appears to be a strong relationship between the possession of social capital and better health. 'As a rough rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year *in half*. If you smoke and belong to no groups, it's a toss-up statistically whether you should stop smoking or start joining' (ibid.: 331). Regular club attendance, volunteering, entertaining, or church attendance is the happiness equivalent of getting a college degree or more than doubling your income. Civic connections rival marriage and affluence as predictors of life happiness (ibid.: 333).

Francis Fukuyama (1999) raises some useful questions around the 'Putnam thesis' and Ladd (1999) is very critical of the approach – disputing the interpretation much of the evidence. However, that was prior to the marshalling of evidence in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). The book is a powerful argument for the cultivation of social networks and the norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness and truthfulness they entail. It also draws attention to some of the downsides of such networks – they can be oppressive and narrowing. It is, therefore, important to work for tolerance and the acceptance, if not celebration, of difference.

Fostering community - communion

Elizabeth Frazer (2000: 83) suggests that given the sorts of conditions we have been discussing, the experience of community 'will be both euphoric and fleeting'. However, there is a significant 'pay-off':

On occasion or at such times members experience a centred and bounded entity that includes the self as such; they engage in exchanges and sharing that are personalized; the orientation to each other and to the whole engages the person and, as some are tempted to put it, his or her soul. It is from such occasions that 'the spirit of community' or 'sense of community' is achieved. Here I think we have the 'pay-off' of community... In the relation of community concrete patterns of material social relations are felt to be transcended... [T]he aspiration to community is an aspiration to a kind of connectedness that transcends the mundane and concrete tangle of social relationships.

This moment of transcendence or connection has been explored by various writers – but for me [Martin Buber's](#) work around encounter and community has been the most suggestive.

For Buber encounter (*Begegnung*) has a significance beyond co-presence and individual growth. He looked for ways in which people could engage with each other fully – to meet with themselves. The basic fact of human existence was not the individual or the collective as such, but 'Man with Man' (Buber 1947). As Aubrey Hodes puts it:

When a human being turns to another as another, as a particular and specific person to be addressed, and tries to communicate with him through language or silence, something takes place between them which is not found elsewhere in nature. Buber called this meeting between men the sphere of the between. (1973: 72)

Encounter (*Begegnung*) is an event or situation in which relation (*Beziehung*) occurs. We can only grow and develop, according to Buber, once we have learned to live in relation to others, to recognize the possibilities of the space between us. The fundamental means is dialogue. 'All real living is meeting' he once wrote.

Such meeting isn't just between two people. Buber believed that in such encounters the eternal could be glimpsed. In speech and silence there was great possibility. In dialogue, a person is present to another (and the other), they are attentive and aware -

listening and waiting. In the stillness of this 'in-between world' they may encounter what cannot yet be put into words.

Education and community

The case for community as an aim of education (or at least the cultivation of social networks and the associated concern with reciprocity, trust and tolerance) is strong. Indeed, we may follow Dewey and argue that working so that all may share in a common life is *the* aim of education. We may also join with Buber and seek to educate so that people may meet each other as truly human. There is also an interesting question of ends and means. Can we educate for community without being in community? Certainly, this has been a key question within debates around schooling for community. In the last few years the idea of community has been the subject of renewed focus among those advancing the communitarian agenda (e.g. Etzioni 1995). For educators there are a number of implications as James Arthur (2000) has noted. One of the strongest questions here has been the tendency of political communitarians to plough a fairly authoritarian furrow.

Our problem in this context is the sheer scale of the task at hand. Increased centralization in many areas of government, globalization and the insinuation of market-thinking into many areas of social life undermine the quality of local social systems and obstruct communion. However, the direction we must take is clear. As Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 149) has argued we need to work to 'gain control over the conditions under which we struggle with the challenges of life'. For the most of us 'such control can be gained only *collectively*'.

Further reading

Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* rev edn., London: Verso. 224 + xv pages. Exploration of the processes that created the global spread of the 'imagined communities' of nationality.

Arthur, J. with Bailey, R. (2000) *Schools and Community. The communitarian agenda in education*, London: Falmer. 165 + ix pages. Helpful review of the main communitarian themes and what might constitute the 'communitarian agenda'. Arthur and Bailey bring out some of the contrasting 'traditions' of thinking and practice and link these, in particular, to schooling. There is also a discussion of the place of religiously affiliated schools.

Bauman, Z. (2001) *Seeking Safety in an insecure world*, Cambridge: Polity Press. 159 pages. Useful overview of the idea in the context of current debates about the nature and future of society.

Beem, C. (1999) *The Necessity of Politics. Reclaiming American public life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 311 + xiv pages. Useful study of civil society and the essential role of political processes in the renewal of societies.

Bell, C. and Newby, H. (1971) *Community Studies*, London: Unwin. 262 pages. Classic overview of community studies (American and European) with a useful chapter discussing theories of community.

Bramson, L. (ed.) (1970) *Robert MacIver on Community, Power and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 319 pages. Interesting collection of MacIver's work - some of it dating back to the early decades of the century. The chapters on community, association and society are well worth a dip.

Cohen, A. P. (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London: Tavistock (now Routledge). 128 pages. Outstanding exploration of 'community' that focuses on it as a cultural phenomenon. Cohen looks at the ways in which the boundaries to communities are symbolically defined and how people become aware of belonging to a community. Chapters examine the 'classical' tradition of community and the

contribution of the Chicago tradition; symbolizing boundaries; communities of meaning; and the symbolic construction of community.

Cohen, A. P. (ed.) (1982) *Belonging. Identity and social organization in British rural cultures*, Manchester: University of Manchester Press. 325 + x pages. This book examines the nature of belonging; social association within localities; and how these may relate to wider appreciations of nation. The book includes some excellent material from ethnographic studies of six rural communities: Anthony Cohen on Whalsay, Shetland; Marilyn Strathern on Elmton; Isabel Emmett on Blaenau Ffestiniog; Peter Mewett on a Lewis crofting community; Sidsel Saugestad Larson on Kilbroney; and Robin Fox on Tory Island.

Crow, G. and Allan, G. (1994) *Community Life. An introduction to local social relations*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 229 + xxv. Excellent overview of the sociology of community in contemporary Britain. Chapters examine the various themes running through the sociology of community; community life in past generations; restructuring communities - the impact of economic change; the significance of geographical mobility; ethnicity, solidarity and social segregation; changing ideals of housing and domesticity; urban redevelopment and community action; community and social policy; and the continuing importance of the sociology of community. As an exploration of the use of the British community studies tradition the book is difficult to fault.

Etzioni, A. (1995) *The Spirit of Community. Rights responsibilities and the communitarian agenda*, London: Fontana Press. 323 + xii pages. Influential US text that argues for the balancing of individualism with social responsibility. The section titles provide an insight into the line: shoring up morality; too many rights, too few responsibilities; the public interest.

Etzioni, A. (1997) *The New Golden Rule. Community and morality in a democratic society*, London: Profile Books. 314 + xxi pages. Interesting development of communitarian debates based around what Etzioni sees as the two cardinal founding principles and core virtues of the good society: social order (based on moral values) and autonomy (or "thick" liberty). The "golden rule" is where these are in equilibrium.

Frazer, E. (1999) *The Problem of Communitarian Politics. Unity and conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 279 + ix pages. Very helpful exploration and critique of the subject with some useful material on community.

Hoggett, P. (ed.) (1997) *Contested Communities: experiences, struggles, policies*, Bristol: Policy Press ISBN 1 86134 036 2. £15.95. Following introductory essays on contested communities (Hoggett) and neighbours (Crow), this book has sections on community and social diversity; local government and community; and community participation and empowerment. The book uses a set of case studies to examine the sources of community activism, the ways communities define themselves and defined by outsiders, and the room for partnerships with different agencies. Internal conflicts within communities are also examined.

Lindeman, E. C. (1921) *The Community. An introduction to the study of community leadership and organization*, New York: Association Press. Influential early book by a figure central to the development of informal adult education.

Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon and Schuster. 541 pages. Brilliant setting out of analysis and evidence concerning the decline and possible reconstruction of civil life in the United States.

Suttles, G. (1972) *The Social Construction of Community*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Influential work that argues for the significance of individuals and groups in the construction of communities.

Tönnies, F. (1955) *Community and Association*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 293 + xxxiv pages. Tönnies' 1887 work still repays reading. Attention tends to focus on the apparent oppositions of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (association or society) - but there is far more here.

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- Fukuyama, F. (1999) *The Great Disruption. Human nature and the reconstitution of social order*, London: Profile Books.

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Links

[Bowling Alone](#): set of pages linked to the book that includes downloadable datasets.

How to cite this article: Smith, M. K. (2001) 'Community' in *the encyclopedia of informal education*, <http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm>.

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