KNOWLEDGE, SUPPORT & SERVEBLOG.ORG: BUILDING AN ONLINE AMERICORPS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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By

Danielle Elizabeth Thomas, B.S.

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ABSTRACT

Due to the scope of the AmeriCorps program, its members do not receive standardized training prior to their service years. Additionally, many members do not serve in teams and lack access to viable support networks. This thesis explores connecting members of the AmeriCorps education realm using Web 2.0 tools such as blogs for the purpose of exchanging knowledge and providing support. Current research cites blogs as vehicles for knowledge repositories and connective community agents; this thesis seeks to combine the potentialities of blogs and build an online community of practice for AmeriCorps members. Through ethnographic interviews and participant-observation methodology, this study examines the interactions of current and former AmeriCorps members within a newly-launched community blog. Analysis of the interactions and interviews reveals that marked leadership and devotion to the domain of AmeriCorps motivates blog members to participate and display community of practice norms. This study adds to our understanding of using blogs as a means of building online communities of practice; it will contribute to future research on the transfer of implicit knowledge to immediate practice.
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# Table of Contents

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................6
- The Theory of “In” ....................................................................................................................7
- Lacking Information & Support ...............................................................................................10
- Developing the Research ........................................................................................................11

## CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS AMERICORPS? ..................................................................................14
- History & Structure ................................................................................................................15
- Successes & Criticism ..............................................................................................................17
- Future ....................................................................................................................................18

## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE & CONSTRUCTS ..........................................................................19
- Chapter 3.1: Communication Theories ..................................................................................19
  - Theories & Application .........................................................................................................20
- Chapter 3.2: Web 2.0 (Or, the Modern Web Era) .................................................................28
  - Blogs .....................................................................................................................................29
  - What is a blog? .......................................................................................................................30
  - Essential elements of the blog .............................................................................................31
- Chapter 3.3: Communities of Practice ..................................................................................37
  - Structure ...............................................................................................................................38
  - Domain .................................................................................................................................38
  - Community ............................................................................................................................39
  - Practice ..................................................................................................................................40
- Communities of Practice and the World Wide Web ...............................................................41
  - General Implementation ......................................................................................................41
  - Blogs as Online Communities of Practice .........................................................................46
- Conclusion ...............................................................................................................................49

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY ...............................................................................................50
- The Ethnography of Communication ......................................................................................50
  - Online ethnography ..............................................................................................................51
  - Ethnography and CoP Norms ...............................................................................................53
  - Serveblog.org ........................................................................................................................54
- Recruitment & Participants .....................................................................................................56
- Measures ..................................................................................................................................58

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS ............................................................................................................60
- The Story of Serveblog.org ......................................................................................................60
  - Starting Out & Speech Codes ...............................................................................................62
  - Return to Speech Codes .......................................................................................................70
  - Knowledge-Sharing & Support ............................................................................................73
  - Emerging CoP Norms: “Good Night, and Pot Luck” ............................................................77
- Motivational Factors ...............................................................................................................90
  - The Regulars ........................................................................................................................91
  - The Irregulars and No-Shows ...............................................................................................92
- Technological Considerations .................................................................................................94
- Conclusion ...............................................................................................................................95
## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

- Methodological Contributions ................................................................. 97
- Other Academic Implications ................................................................. 99
- Practical Implications ........................................................................ 103
- AmeriCorps-Specific Application ...................................................... 106
- Limitations ....................................................................................... 108

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION .................................................................. 111

## CHAPTER 8: APPENDIX.................................................................... 113

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>AmeriCorps Community Blog Network Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Blog Participant Information &amp; Example Screenshots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Skeleton Interview Questions (General Themes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Informed Consent Document</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## REFERENCES .................................................................................. 125
Chapter 1: Introduction

Somewhere between crawling through a broken fence and jumping off a ten-foot wall into a dank alleyway, I considered the practicality of my education degree. Eight months into my inner-city teaching stint, the countless hours of yore spent writing social studies lesson plans and classroom management policies for suburban schools had long been relegated to the nostalgia files. There, the classroom largely ended at the door; here, it extended into the street, the neighborhood, and most of all, the perceptions of the kids. No amount of teaching ability I had could compensate for not being a trusted member of their community.

Which is why, on that day, I was right alongside my group of teenagers on a jaunt to the Metro that included a questionable “shortcut”; eight months previously, I would have either insisted we walk on the main streets or simply stayed behind.

It must have shown.

When one girl had refused to jump off the aforementioned wall, those of us already on the street below proved unsuccessful in all attempts of cajoling. Finally, the group’s social leader crowed, “Miss Danielle’s mo’ Edgewood ‘n you!” Implying that the “white girl” carried more authenticity as a member of the neighborhood because I blithely jumped off the wall certainly did the trick – we were on our way to the train in no time. But the verbal, indirect acceptance of me propelled a noticeable change in my classes and relationships in general. Finally, as a trusted figure, my teaching could truly be meaningful; I just wish it had not taken eight months.
The theory of “in”

The year I served in AmeriCorps suggested that all of my education training and experience were nearly worthless without cultural context – a living example of “street smart” versus “book smart.” I spent between 8 and 10 hours per day at a youth center located on the ground floor of a multi-high rise unit in a violent, low-income neighborhood in Northeast DC. Officially, I worked as an after-school tutor and taught evening classes in photography and digital media design; unofficially, I often served as a parent, sibling, counselor, and any other role required to best support the at-risk youth with whom I worked.

Upon arriving in DC to begin my service, I knew few details of my assignment other than its nonprofit affiliation and location. No training for my specific site occurred, though I did participate in a generic two-day “orientation” for members of my AmeriCorps subgroup. Unfortunately, that event mostly served as a team-building exercise and a brief “introduction to diversity” rather than a constructive seminar. At the time, however, I did not believe I would benefit from additional training – I had a secondary education degree and ample experience working with youth both in and out of the classroom. I studied urban education and read everything ever written by the foremost expert in the field, Jonathan Kozol. I had an open mind, a bleeding heart, and a drive to stay committed to my assignment.

That was not nearly enough.
The youth who solicited the programming attended both DC public and charter schools, respectively, and the vast majority lived within the housing complex. The apartments housed a growing number of families well below the poverty level, perhaps due to recent increased deterioration of the area. The participants, nearly all of whom were African-American, were free to attend our program at their discretion, though most were regular visitors because it served as an escape from the danger of the streets, the confinement of tiny apartments, and the lack of positive encouragement from adult figures. Because of this, I assumed they would be especially receptive to someone who showed interest in their lives – but the opposite proved true.

“Opposite,” I learned, seemed to rule the communicative policy. In my previous teaching experience, there had been nothing that kids loved more than talking about themselves. But here, “showing an interest” in their lives only made them more suspicious that I had ulterior motives; they became even more resistant to my attentions. I noticed they seemed to have no problem with another white employee with a job similar to mine – but he had worked there for over four years. Still, teenagers are, at their essence, moody and fickle, so I figured that it would take a bit of time and effort to get to know everyone.

Unfortunately, it became apparent after several weeks that my struggles were not simply a byproduct of unfamiliarity. They did not want to know me – and they did not want me to know them. Such conclusions regularly manifested throughout the tenuous early stages of my service when the straight, linear stages of classroom communication seemed more like circles and squiggles. What I had initially blamed on adolescent
shyness and general unease of the “new person” could no longer be rationalized; for them, there existed two planes of communication – “in” and “out.” I wanted to be “in.” With nary a book, expert or co-worker to advise me otherwise, I adopted the philosophy of simply “being there.” I thought the only true method for determining why rules of communication were so different from what I knew was to integrate and imitate. I had to stop thinking like a teacher and start thinking like a member of their community. This philosophy expanded beyond adopting some of their slang terminology (though there was plenty of that) and into consciously ignoring many of the communicative instincts that had embodied the entirety of my previous interactions with youth. Gradually, I saw marked improvement, was able to form some incredibly meaningful relationships, and achieved the goals for my service.

I did not learn until graduate school that I had actually been employing the very essence of speech codes theory (Philipsen 1992): a yearlong, emic, subjectivist exercise in discovering the cultural rules by which they lived, and why I could not reach an effective teaching level without adhering to such codes.

As a teacher in the suburban Midwest, I had always been conscious of when my classes shifted into the optimal realm of communicative comfort – in which my relationship with teenage students permitted a certain level of trust, held a relaxed familiarity, and encouraged an open classroom atmosphere most conducive to learning. A few well-timed jokes here, some team-building there – it usually happened within a matter of weeks.
As a teacher in inner-DC, there were times when I wondered if I could ever reach that point. When I finally did after eight months, I wished I had more than the upcoming summer to teach with maximum impact; even a month or a week can have a significant effect when working with a population that is in dire need of positive adult influence.

**Lacking information & support**

Had I better understood the rules that governed their speech community, I may have gotten “in” faster. I considered how this could be rectified for future members and briefly entertained applying the concept of “student teaching” to AmeriCorps. As part of the student teaching portion for my undergraduate degree, I was required to observe my cooperating teacher for six weeks before assuming her teaching duties. Already knowing the students, school structure, other teachers, and classroom atmosphere made the transition to teaching nearly seamless. Perhaps if I had been required to visit my AmeriCorps site prior to starting and meet with the current member serving that position, I could have learned about the cultural community and the strategies she had employed thus far. She could have also served as the bridge between the students and myself to accelerate the “trust process,” which I found was the key to getting “in.”

I also considered the bi-monthly meetings I had attended with my AmeriCorps subgroup. The 12 members serving in the Washington, DC chapter met to discuss strategies, experiences and other topics. Such sharing of experiences and knowledge to produce a better output embodied aspects of “communities of practice.” However, no one in the group served in the same educational setting as me, therefore it was difficult to
relate our experiences to find applicable solutions. Perhaps if there existed a more concentrated, effective community of practice for members serving within a certain educational setting, better solutions and information could be shared.

Unfortunately, given the expansive nature of the AmeriCorps network, both of these strategies are likely impossible to employ from a logistical standpoint.

**Developing the research**

As it turns out, the answer may have been in front of me the whole time: the Internet. Granted, many resources currently exist online – especially for teachers. Entire websites are devoted to lesson planning, classroom management, and general education troubleshooting. However, a critical element is missing: context. AmeriCorps members operate in environments that differ greatly from traditional classrooms – in terms of resources, student population, and other factors. Cultural speech communities enforce varied rules for communicating; these rules are often unspoken, and the member will be required to decipher them before lessons and other interaction can have impact. Without addressing challenges through the lens of the environmental context, it is unlikely that strategies applied in other educational settings would succeed in an AmeriCorps setting.

However, by employing modern Web communicative technology, the missing context can be addressed. During my service year, without a traditional support network, I poured countless hours into documenting my service experiences, frustrations and successes on my own blog. Although it primarily served as a personal account for myself and the few family and friends who followed along from the Midwest, it could have
become much more: the blog exemplified a vehicle for connecting similar AmeriCorps members online. Blogs and other Web 2.0 technology can provide the mechanisms necessary to connect the members who, like me, serve in isolation with little or no support. Additionally, those who do find success at their respective positions will have the ability to share that information.

Eleven months before he was elected, Barack Obama delivered a speech at Cornell College about the importance of service. He included specific plans regarding the expansion of AmeriCorps and lauded its potential:

Today, AmeriCorps - our nation's network of local, state and national service programs - has 75,000 slots. As President, I will increase that to 250,000, and make that increased service a vehicle to meet national goals like providing health care and education, saving our planet and restoring our standing in the world, so that citizens see their efforts connected to a common purpose. People of all ages, stations, and skills will be asked to serve. Because when it comes to the challenges we face, the American people are not the problem - they are the answer.¹

The responsibility the new administration has placed upon “the people” is clear – thus, “the people” who undertake this specific mission need access to tools that aid the highest possible success. Donating a year of service to AmeriCorps should carry a legacy beyond impressive resume fodder. The work involved is intellectually challenging, emotionally taxing, and – at times – even physically dangerous. The populations served

are often forgotten by all but understaffed non-profit organizations trying to survive themselves in the weakened economy. While the time spent serving is ephemeral, the skills, knowledge and experiences of the individual members need not be. By accessing the legacy of knowledge constructed by other members, those involved in the yearly turnover may better understand the complex cultural context of their communities and attain quicker success. Additionally, the ability to interact online with members in similar positions may provide the vital support network otherwise absent for those serving in isolated areas. By applying frames that construct communities of practice to the vehicles of modern web technology, this research explores a potential solution to improve the future of AmeriCorps; perhaps it, too, lies within “the people.”
Chapter 2: What is AmeriCorps?

In September of 2007, I joined several thousand other Costco Wholesale members at an author signing in Arlington, Virginia. The book was *Giving*; the signee was President Bill Clinton.

In typical Secret Service fashion, patrons were efficiently directed through a towering maze of bulk soft drinks and produce crates. The structure allowed for each person to approach President Clinton, hand him the book, wait a few seconds while he signed it, and continue back outside the perimeter. I noticed that several people ahead of me quickly spoke before the Secret Service ushered them along, and I considered what profound thing I could say during my one, brief meeting with a former President of the United States. I could have underscored our Georgetown connection, fawned over Hillary’s ongoing presidential run, or stammered some incoherent pleasantries like the star-struck woman in front of me.

Instead, I kept it simple: “Thanks for AmeriCorps.”

His smile transformed from obligatory to genuine as he rapidly fired off all the essential questions – where did I serve? What did I do? How was the experience? We chatted for about two minutes – an eternity under the circumstances – until finally he thanked me and I left understanding entirely why he believed the AmeriCorps legislation was one of his best accomplishments in office.

Often referred to as the “Domestic Peace Corps,” AmeriCorps is a federal government program that partners with hundreds of non-profits, faith-based
organizations, and public agencies to place volunteers in extended stints of service within a varying range of low-income communities around the United States.

**History & Structure**

The federal government has long embraced and promoted the ideals of community service – from Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps, established in 1933, to Lyndon Johnson’s Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), founded in 1965. Bill Clinton sought to streamline the many programs and ideas in existence and create new ones by founding the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal agency. Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which established AmeriCorps.

The Corporation for National and Community Service oversees AmeriCorps, the Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America. According to CNCS annual data, over two million volunteers participate among the three divisions per year. AmeriCorps itself is divided into three major programs: AmeriCorps*State & National, AmeriCorps*VISTA, and AmeriCorps*NCCC. Prospective volunteers may apply for the different programs depending on – but not limited to – their interests, skills, and age.

1. **AmeriCorps*State & National**

The largest and most varied sector of AmeriCorps, State & National provides grants to organizations that place AmeriCorps members within communities where they engage in direct service and capacity-building to address unmet needs. Members serve a
variety of direct-service activities, depending on their skills and interests. Many of these sub-programs specialize in specific areas such as education, health, public safety, environment, and public housing. This makes the application process easier – prospective members can search for positions sorted by different fields. For example, I searched for education programs and browsed within the resulting list of organizations that sought applicants for various positions. The sub-program for which I ultimately served was a faith-based organization that placed members within education-focused positions in over a dozen U.S. cities. Full-time State & National members who complete at least 1700 hours of service during their stint receive the Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, a $4,725 scholarship to be used for education purposes such as college tuition or loan repayment. Members also receive health care and a “modest living allowance” stipend (americorps.gov). The original research discussed in forthcoming chapters focuses solely on AmeriCorps*State & National members.

II. AmeriCorps*VISTA

President Johnson’s previously-established *VISTA organization now exists under the larger umbrella of AmeriCorps. *VISTA differs because its members must serve full-time for a year at a nonprofit organization or local government agency. There, they “fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, strengthen community groups”(americorps.gov). *VISTA members receive the same benefits during and upon completion of service as State & National members.
III. AmeriCorps*NCCC

Unlike the previous two programs, the National Civilian Community Corps, or *NCCC, is a team-based residential program for members aged 18-24. About 1,200 members are chosen per year to serve at one of five campuses located in different regions of the United States. Projects largely focus in areas of disaster relief, housing renovation, trail clearing, and tutoring. Members live and operate within a close-knit team, unlike other sectors of AmeriCorps in which service is often isolated.

Successes & Criticism

While the importance AmeriCorps holds in helping low-income communities is tangible, the personal success members achieve through service has also been noted. A longitudinal study of service in AmeriCorps and published in 2004 found many positive impacts of service on members: AmeriCorps members increased their level of civic engagement on many of the outcome measures, while comparison group members typically showed little or no change; members experienced significant increases in their work skills and were significantly more likely than the comparison group to choose public service careers; and participation resulted in positive impacts on members’ connection to community, knowledge about problems, and participation in community-based activities.

The initial effect of AmeriCorps participation for AmeriCorps*State & National is consistently positive across a majority of civic engagement,
education, employment and life skills outcomes, and over half of the effects are statistically significant (nationalservice.gov).

Several main criticisms still plague the AmeriCorps organization as a whole. A study conducted by Van Til, Gallup & Swalve (1999) found that only 18% of survey respondents believed the federal government should be the lead agency in assuring national service. Also criticized were the program’s tendency to “add more beaurocracy to the federal and state government.” Another debate still reigns over the ideology of volunteerism: should AmeriCorps members be paid for service? Members may point out that their below-poverty level living stipend is not exactly a “salary,” but many still believe the government should not be in the business of hiring community service volunteers.

**Future**

In recent years, AmeriCorps has received more national recognition and attention than ever before. As such, many colleges and universities have recognized the commitment of AmeriCorps alumni by doubling their education award scholarship. AmeriCorps was nearly victim to budget cuts several times in the last decade; however, even as the economy lies in dire straits, President Obama has stressed AmeriCorps’ continued importance and relevance. Should his campaign promises reach fruition, the program should see significant growth and visibility in the near future.
Chapter 3: Literature & Constructs

Exploring interdisciplinary constructs in both theoretical and practical contexts establishes the foundation on which my study is built. Communication theories, the most central of which relate to cultural communication, provide an academic perspective on the challenges AmeriCorps members may face within their service placement communities. An overview of the Web 2.0 Era and one of its central connective vehicles – blogs – illustrates the mechanism by which those who serve in isolation can connect to similar members. Finally, “community of practice” literature examines the organizational concept’s theoretical origins and its practical application in the online realm.

Chapter 3.1: Communication Theories

One seemingly unsolvable problem that plagues AmeriCorps members is the program’s adoption of the “learn how to swim once you hit the water” philosophy of integrating new hires. Members are expected to perform their duties within communities that most have never before visited – and for the “education sector,” those duties depend on exemplary communication skills. The typical populations of communities served include those of low socioeconomic status, diverse cultures, and occasionally English language learners. Both the AmeriCorps member’s lack of experience working with a
unique population and said population’s unfamiliarity with the member pose communicative challenges.

Communication theories have long explained the dynamics of interaction, however, some do not apply to the unique context of the typical AmeriCorps community. Proponents of social penetration theory believe there is a structured pattern to interaction and advancement of relationships. I found that during my experience, this did not apply. Instead, I learned that until I fully understood the cultural speech codes (Philipsen 1992) of the community, the levels of social penetration could not be reached – and neither would optimal communication.

I explored literature in both social penetration and speech codes within the framework of my service experience to better explain the difficult, unique context in which my study participants have previously, or are currently trying to communicate their service commitments. It is this context that drives the necessity for a specialized knowledge community that would seek to improve AmeriCorps education members’ experiences.

Theories & Application

The single most important proficiency in teaching is not preparation, subject knowledge, or classroom management. Instead, it is the willingness to take genuine interest in the lives of students. Youth who know their teacher truly cares about their welfare have a relational incentive to stay motivated. Despite the vast difference in work
environment, I brought this philosophy to my AmeriCorps community, assuming that “kids were kids,” and that once a foundation was built, relationships would flourish as they had in my past experiences – where some students were easier to connect with than others, but all were ultimately reachable. I felt this process would be universally applicable.

One philosophy communication scholars use for explaining such relational development is social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor 1973). In its earliest form, the theory suggested relationships move through four sequential stages as they develop. The first stage is marked by cautious interaction largely ruled by social formulas, while the second stage features interactants who are more relaxed and willing to share information beyond socially approved “small talk.” Romantic relationships and deep friendships are typically characteristic of the third stage, with few ever reaching the final, stable exchange, which often features nonverbal communication (Altman & Taylor 1973). According to the theory, the closer the interactants become, the further they advance in the linear stages. In its more recent analysis, social penetration theory cites reciprocity and self-disclosure as key elements in developing depth of communication (Altman & Taylor 1973). This process has been evident in not only my adult relationships, but also those I have had with students. While teachers and students would likely never reach the same level of self-disclosure as best friends and spouses, the ability to achieve the trust and reliance marked by higher-scale relationships is essential for quality educating.
Social penetration theory examines the process by which people communicate to form relationships, however, culture can deter the typical course of communicative action. It is perhaps not until one has interacted within a vastly different culture that the intricate web of speech codes theory (Philipsen 1997) finally materializes. The theory maintains that communication is best understood ethnographically. Speech codes serve as guidelines for conceptualizing cultural norms and practices into a coordinated message system. Current commitments have lead to the creation of speech codes propositions that answer several questions on the theory, including existence, substance, sites, observation, and force (Philipsen 1997).

Shortly after my commitment began, it became apparent that my role would be most beneficial if it tended towards “mentor and friend” than that of a traditional school setting. The informal atmosphere only served to reinforce this notion. During my past experiences integrating with a new group of youth, the development of these types of relationships greatly followed social penetration rhetoric. While I certainly expected the Edgewood teens to be of different sociological backgrounds than those I had previously taught, I wrongly assumed relationship development was similar across different cultures. Social penetration theory also assumes that cultural norms are universal. It fails to account for the perspectives and experiences of intercultural parties.

One controversial supposition within social penetration theory is the idea that before entering a relationship, one will assess the possible rewards and costs of that relationship (Altman & Taylor 1973). Opponents argue that relationships are not
economic calculations (Wood 2000). My observations serving in AmeriCorps procured a third option: the default position. The youth of my program adopted a closed-off demeanor and a “trust no one” mantra when interacting with adults. Whether it concerned social workers, metropolitan police, probation officers, or at first, me – those with authority (called “Feds”) were “out,” and not privy to the same plane of communication as those who were “in.” Though I shed my “Fed” label more quickly than I expected, gaining enough trust to be “in” required the aforementioned eight months of patience; and with some youth, I never earned it and likely never would have. I concluded that it was due to the second proposition of speech codes theory, which posits that, “within a particular speech community, multiple speech codes are deployed”(Philipsen 1992). Youth of their circumstance have often been disillusioned by the adults in their lives – from parental abandonment and uncaring teachers to manipulative gang leaders and unscrupulous police. As such, they did not “assess the possible rewards” upon meeting me, but rather assumed the automatic defensive stance to ensure self-preservation. I was seen as another authority figure determined to either undermine them or pretend to care during the short term, only to desert them later. From their perspective, it was much easier to not let anyone “in.”

The key to advancing in the stages of a relationship, according to social penetration discourse, is through reciprocity and self-disclosure. One study that used the social penetration lens to study friendships concluded, “the development of friendship is based on private negotiations and is not imposed through cultural values or norms”(Gudykunst 1985). While the term “friendship” is loosely defined, it was
ultimately the relationship I strove to reach with my service youth. The study also found that United States citizens disclose at a higher rate than other countries (Gudykunst 1985) – though it did not account for various cultures within the United States. The sample survey group included students at a northeastern university; perhaps a wider sample, including those of low socioeconomic status or inner-city residency, would yield different results. After interacting within the Edgewood culture for some time, I found that self-disclosure practices were largely nonexistent, and expecting to receive them was met with contempt. I observed a co-worker who constantly pressed the youth for specific details about their daily lives outside of the program. As that action continued, she was systematically pushed backwards towards the “out” plane of communication. The youth believed adults who sought such information did so with malicious intent. This cultural norm is best explained by the speech codes proposition that states, “the significance of speaking is contingent upon the speech codes used by interlocutors to constitute the meaning of communicative acts” (Philipsen 1992). Once I learned that some seemingly benign practices in one culture spelled disaster in another, I was able to better integrate and become further accepted among the community.

For example, I was in the midst of a difficult struggle to help a young man’s reading skills improve. One day I noticed he wore a probationary ankle tracker. As a teacher, my instincts were to ask why he wore it, what he was in trouble for, and if there was anything I could do to help. But having observed the laws of the neighborhood, I knew that would only discourage him from volunteering his afternoons to me. I stayed quiet, and we continued working together and building trust. About five months later, he
asked for help on an assignment that required his writing of a recent life event he wished could be “done over.” Without any prompting from me, he began relating the events that led to his arrest and subsequent probation. Because enough trust existed, he knew that I would not use his rare self-disclosure for any malicious purpose.

Li-Rong Lilly Cheng (2007) discussed similar issues in her article about decoding speech and seeking cultural intelligence. She addressed the idea of cultural intelligence as an aptitude and skill, citing the example of a grasshopper as three very different items across cultures: a pest (United States), a pet (China), and an appetizer (Northern Thailand). Even concepts such as politeness have different implications across cultures (Koyama 2003). Learning the differences among seemingly universal practices and having the ability to adapt against what is natural and instinctive of one’s own background is essential to intercultural communication.

Gudyunst’s (1985) study concluded that despite differences, intercultural friendships should still follow social penetration as intracultural ones do. But time spent within the Edgewood culture only proved otherwise. Although the boy eventually did self-disclose, it was a rare occurrence and the manner and circumstances vastly differed from the definition offered by social penetration theory. My interactions with Edgewood youth also contradicted a study by Martin, Rubin, & Rubin (1993) which found people who see themselves as being able to make others like them report they self-disclose more positive things. Even towards the end of my service, while very much on the “in” communication plane, the youth rarely self-disclosed anything, whether positive or negative attributes.
Because I discovered the necessity of adopting the local speech codes, I had a measure of success developing relationships, leading to a rewarding experience. However, even in my most successful relationships, some elements of the culture were absolute and impenetrable. Another proposition of speech codes theory, which states that “a speech code implicates a culturally distinctive psychology, sociology, and rhetoric” (Philipsen 1992), became the most difficult to understand. It promotes the idea that those within the speech codes community embody the same common values.

One such value, known locally as “don’t snitch,” is an institution of non-communication. Throughout the year our neighborhood was plagued with enough gun violence that residents resurrected its former nickname, “Little Beirut.” However, police were unable to arrest any culprits because witnesses refused to report crime details. When I tried talking with one of my “regulars” about this issue, he concluded his long and convoluted reasoning by telling me, “you ain’t from here – you don’t get it.” Similarly, when our youth center was burglarized and vandalized so badly as to cease programming for three weeks, none of the participants volunteered information to find those responsible. I decided to confront a 16-year-old girl with whom I had developed a good relationship thus far, certain she would confide in me – only to receive the same feigned-ignorance, “party line” response. I thought our relationship had advanced enough that she would trust me – especially since the situation directly involved the services and efforts donated to help her. But because of the common, cultural value of anti-snitching, she refused to speak up. At the time, I could not understand why and became very upset. Most of the youth knew who was responsible – some probably even
witnessed it. “I know you know,” I told her. She just shrugged. No matter how close we became and how many cultural boundaries we crossed, speech codes dictated that some rules were absolute. Perhaps this is why, though with limited research, the formation of intercultural friendship is “difficult, problematic, challenging, and onerous” (Chen 2005). The lack of research that focuses on the domestic application of speech codes theory may account for both the lack of understanding and the lack of training and support officially provided by AmeriCorps.

Mere miles separate Eastern DC from world-famous tourist attractions, but the cultural and socioeconomic differences transform short distances into gaping metaphoric chasms. Proximity does not equate to cultural understanding. In order to better serve those who need the most help, one must first fully understand their perspective. Beneath the layers of distrust, violence and poverty, the youth of my service community were just like any other group of teenagers – silently begging for positive adult influence. I wanted to fulfill that role, but found it impossible to fully perform my job without reaching that “most important proficiency of teaching.” While the process for breaking down their defenses veered off the track of social penetration rhetoric, a willingness to learn and embrace the cultural speech codes became the only road to success. The sooner that AmeriCorps members understand this communicative context, the sooner they can adjust their approach to teaching and find more success on the “in” plane.
Chapter 3.2: Web 2.0 (Or, the Modern Web Era)

The 1993 release of the Mosaic Browser cut the metaphoric ribbon and officially launched the public’s ability to browse the World Wide Web. It propelled the exploration of perhaps – with due apologies to Star Trek – the true “final frontier.” What followed was nearly a decade of emerging tools and expanding utility for the connective technology. However, if the 1990s represented the settling of unexplored cyber lands, the “Dot-Com Bust” of 2000 appeared to signal the end of the gold rush.

But, rather than imploding completely, the Web and its continuously growing population of users ushered in a resurgence of innovation: Web 2.0. The term is largely attributed to Tim O’Reilly, founder of O’Reilly Media, though there still exists debate over the true definition of the modern Web era. What remains certain, however, is Web 2.0’s existence as a transformative force that is inciting companies from varied industries to embrace frameworks of user participation, openness, and network effects (O’Reilly et al. 2006). The central principle behind the success of the giants born in the early Web era who have survived to lead the Web 2.0 era appears to be embracing the Web’s power to harness collective intelligence (O’Reilly 2005).

“Flock” CEO Bart Decrem (2006) called Web 2.0 “the participatory Web” because of its embracing of user-generated, user-facilitated and reciprocated content. Some of the driving forces that embody these principles are sites such as eBay, del.icio.us, Wikipedia, Craigslist and Skype. Social networking giants Facebook and MySpace are also significant examples of the appeal of networked personal connections. Similarly, professional networking sites such as LinkedIn have applied the successful
social framework to a business context. Web 2.0 signaled a shift from “being a medium, in which information was transmitted and consumed, into being a platform, in which content was created, shared, remixed, repurposed, and passed along” (Downes 2005).

According to the Nielsen Media Research, the United States had 220,141,969 Internet users as of June 2008, or 72.5% of the total population; the world’s entire usage totals over 1.5 billion. Nielsen also reported that mobile devices now outnumber computer desktops three to one (Nielsen 2008). As the nation and world continue to embrace connectivity, the usefulness of the Internet will only increase. Not only are millions of people using the Internet, they are also utilizing it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in one of the most important and prolific components built entirely on the connection of user-driven content – the blogosphere.

**Blogs**

It appears the “blogosphere” has grown so large that trying to count all the blogs in existence is nearly impossible. Technorati, an Internet search engine for blog content, does its best: according to the site’s “State of the Blogosphere,” as of June 2008, 112.8 million blogs were indexed there, along with 250 million pieces of tagged social media. Indeed, some blogs exist that are not affiliated with Technorati, and many non-English language blogs are also not indexed. In other words, the numbers could be significantly higher. So, what is a blog, and why are over 100 million people using them? Modern web era expert O’Reilly (2005) had an idea:
If an essential part of Web 2.0 is harnessing collective intelligence, turning the web into a kind of global brain, the blogosphere is the equivalent of constant mental chatter in the forebrain, the voice we hear in all of our heads. It may not reflect the deep structure of the brain, which is often unconscious, but is instead the equivalent of conscious thought. And as a reflection of conscious thought and attention, the blogosphere has begun to have a powerful effect.

What is a blog?

Weblogs, or “blogs” as they are more widely known, are Internet self-publishing platforms. They exist on Web sites maintained by individuals who regularly provide their own content. Although believed by some to operate exclusively as “online diaries,” blogs have expanded in purpose – often housing political or news commentary, information on a particular subject, or opinions on media and entertainment topics. The collective community of blogs is known as the blogosphere. The popularity of blogs may stem from, among other things, their simplicity and low cost of operation. Maintaining a blog requires no previous knowledge of web design or coding, and many platforms feature free open source software. Those who wish to create their own blog have two basic options: solicit the service of a blogging site such as Blogger.com, Wordpress.com, or Livejournal; or, purchase private webspace and host their own blog.
Essential elements of the blog

At its very core, the blog expresses individuality. As such, there likely exist nearly as many different styles of blog layouts as there are blogs on the Web. Maintainers have the ability to alter color, font, image and general design principles. However, the skeleton of the blog is uniform among the masses, and encompasses three main sections: the header, content/posts, and sidebars.

Fig. 1.
• **Header**

The header is located in the uppermost portion of the blog and is static, that is, it remains on the page even when the content below it changes. The most important element within the header is the blog’s title; each blog has a unique name in order to differentiate from other blogs. The name is also what will represent the blog on other sites’ blogrolls, or, list of links. Some blogs display a subtitle that further explains its motto or content. In Fig. 1, the blog’s title is “Capitol Rear View,” and its subtitle is “Ongoings in the Forgotten Periphery: An AmeriCorps Chronicle.” Occasionally, the header includes an image, as also shown in Fig. 1.
• *Posts*

Posts are the blog’s main source of content. Unlike static web pages, blogs allow for the continuous publishing of fresh content. The posts section of the blog is typically the largest of the columns below the header. The author can publish text, photos, videos or other media, links, and whatever else fits the nature of the post. Posts are most commonly formatted to appear in reverse chronological order – the newest material appears directly below the header, and continues down the page with older posts. Blog posts contains other important elements:

1. *Permalink*

Each post’s headline is automatically converted into a permalink, which allows an outside source to connect directly with the content. In Fig. 1, clicking on “The Fellowship of the Bling” will take the user to that entry’s permalink page. Coates (2003) noted the seemingly innocuous feature’s greater importance:

“[The permalink] was effectively the device that turned weblogs from an ease-of-publishing phenomenon into a conversational mess of overlapping communities. For the first time it became relatively easy to gesture directly at a highly specific post on someone else's site and talk about it … the permalink was the first - and most successful - attempt to build bridges between weblogs.”

2. *Comments*

At the conclusion of each post, subscribers and readers have the option of leaving comments and discussing the above content. When a comment is posted, the total
number accompanied on posts will reflect the change, as to make browsing for highly-discussed posts easier. As shown in Fig. 2, the lone comment is expanded on the post’s permalink page. There, the comment form is also shown.

3. Tags

Posts are “tagged” by assigning them keywords that relate to the content within. It is a concept that some have termed "folksonomy" (in contrast to taxonomy). According to O’Reilly (2005), tagging allows for the kind of multiple, overlapping associations that the brain itself uses, rather than rigid categories. In Fig. 2, the post displays numerous tags: “The Professor, Bitsy, gentrification, Diva, race, Dimples, Georgetown, photography, field trip, AmeriCorps, Washington DC, service, Tyson, Cupcake, Red, Bug,” all of which refer to some specific mention or theme within the post. Tagging also establishes a searchable archive of terms so that the user can easily locate all material on a given topic, theme, or term; each tag transforms into its own link, which leads the reader to a page containing that material. For example, should the reader want to view more entries containing the term “gentrification,” he should click on that tag’s link.

4. Trackbacks

A trackback link appears near the comments section of each post and indicates the number of other blogs who have linked to the page. By viewing the trackbacks, the blog maintainer can determine who is linking to them and respond in kind.

- Sidebars
The final main element of blog construction is the sidebar. It contains various supplementary content alongside the main content column. The material is usually that which does not need frequent updating. Blogs will usually either utilize a one or two sidebar layout. The blog in Fig. 1 uses a one, right sidebar option. Some of the material included in sidebars are: blogrolls (lists of links to other blogs that the maintainer frequents), brief biographies or personal keywords (such as “Student / Washington, DC / dog lover”), or famous quotes. Some of the more important items contained in sidebars are:

1. **RSS Feeds**

RSS is a Web syndicator that can publish frequently updated works, including but not limited to blog entries and news headlines. An RSS document, also called a “feed,” includes the full or abbreviated text. RSS is especially useful to readers who subscribe to timely updates:

“RSS allows someone to link not just to a page, but to subscribe to it, with notification every time that page changes. Skrenta calls this ‘the incremental web.’ Others call it the ‘live web’ … the web browser is not the only means of viewing a web page. While some RSS aggregators, such as Bloglines, are web-based, others are desktop clients, and still others allow users of portable devices to subscribe to constantly updated content” (O’Reilly 2005).

2. **Archives**

Most blogs include a clickable calendar within the sidebar that allows the user to search through previous entries that are archived chronologically. In Fig. 1, the blog
features a list of chronological months rather than a calendar. Both methods are common throughout the blogosphere.

3. Categories/Tag Clouds

Sidebars also include a category list, tag cloud, or both. The category list is a series of links that allow the user to search through content by the post’s classification. Tag clouds are clickable “maps” of collected keywords (tags) from posts. The more often a tag is used, the larger the tag appears in the tag cloud. Tags that are only used once or not as often will appear smaller.

4. Search

The final element of the sidebar is the universal search box. It serves as the crudest method for searching through the content archives.

Blogs have expanded to mainstream use in recent years. They are used professionally and personally. Many online newspapers often feature blogs to meet the demand of the 24-hour news cycle:

As the Blogosphere grows in size and influence, the lines between what is a blog and what is a mainstream media site become less clear. Larger blogs are taking on more characteristics of mainstream sites and mainstream sites are incorporating styles and formats from the Blogosphere. In fact, 95% of the top 100 US newspapers have reporter blogs (Technorati 2008).

The potential for collaborative learning using Web 2.0 technology has the potential to merge with an organizational knowledge concept called communities of practice.
Chapter 3.3: Communities of Practice

Groups of people passionate about given subjects are abundant in our society. From *Star Wars* conventions to gardening clubs to alumni gatherings, certain commonalities will always draw together those that share interests. Similarly, groups have often been looked upon to solve problems and generate ideas. While the phrase “two heads are better than one” has been largely relegated to cliché, the originators may have been onto something. Organizational researchers sought to harness both the devotion of common interest groups and the collective knowledge produced through collaboration. The result: the concept of “communities of practice.”

Communities of practice are described by Etienne Wenger (2002) as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” Wenger and anthropologist Jean Lave coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. Since then, the community of practice (CoP) has been associated with knowledge management, as people have utilized the concept to develop social capital within organizations. The key points of other CoP definitions include knowledge sharing, learning, solving of common problems of a group, and construction of a common knowledge repository (Hafeez & Alghatas 2007).
Structure

Communities of practice adhere to a basic structure that separates them from other types of groups and organizational concepts. While functional units, operational teams, informal networks and professional associations share some CoP characteristics, they lack the complete structure unique to CoPs. The CoP elements – domain, community, and practice – must work concurrently to produce the highest possible success. Wenger et al. (2002) noted that the three parts “guide community developments by indicating the various areas on which one needs to focus in order to foster a well-rounded community.”

Domain

The common definition of “domain” also describes its function within a CoP: a field of action, thought or influence. The CoP’s domain provides its backbone and its purpose, establishing common ground and common identity. According to Wenger et al. (2002), “without commitment to a domain, a community is just a group of friends … a shared domain creates a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge and therefore to the development of a practice.” Thus, members of a CoP must have considerable motivation to regularly contribute knowledge and seek solutions for the challenges faced by the community. Research suggests that the more committed members are to the domain, the more motivated they will be to participate (Wasko & Faraj 2000).

Domains are not centered on fixed sets of problems, but rather feature common challenges and key issues central to all of its members. Wenger et al. note, “the most
successful communities of practice thrive where the goals and needs of an organization intersect with the passions and aspirations of its participants.”

**Community**

Community is seemingly the most self-explanatory part of the CoP anatomy; however the concept of community is much more complex than a simple gathering of people. Thomas Bender argued that the community is “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds” (Bender 1978). Robert Nisbet wrote that community draws its “psychological strength from levels of motivation deeper than those of mere volition or interest” (Nisbet 1980, Bender 1978).

The definition of community within a CoP is a “group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” (Wenger et al. 2002). Relationship building is essential because it fosters trust, which in turn promotes openness. Perhaps this is what separates a “community” from a mere “group” – in most situations, close relationships within communities allow members to be more open with one another. Such trust grants social permission for members to share personal anecdotes that add depth to the knowledge base. Additionally, knowing one another makes it easier to ask for help (Wenger et al. 2002).

At its core, the community promotes social learning: “Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts” (Wenger et
Communities also thrive when those individual perspectives are derived from a diverse set of members. Although the entire community is working within the context of a single domain, the information each member provides can weave a working set of solutions and ideas that cover the spectrum of experience. Wenger and colleagues (2002) agreed when they wrote that, “with enough common ground for ongoing mutual engagement, a good dose of diversity makes for richer learning, more interesting relationships, and increased creativity.”

**Practice**

Without practice, the CoP is simply a social community. The final portion of the CoP structure is the knowledge base constructed by community members that can be accessed and distributed across a company. The practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains (Wenger et al 2002). Each community has a specific way of making its practice visible through the ways that it develops and shares knowledge.

This knowledge output gives CoPs their legitimacy in problem solving. The collected experiences of others provide vicarious experience that is helpful when encountering future problems. One reason experts on a given subject may solve a problem more readily than novices is that the experts access a mental pattern relying on experience, which they can integrate on a particular problem and use it to quickly detect a solution (Leonard & Sensiper 1998). An effective practice organizes knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective. Additionally,
the practice element facilitates the transition of implicit knowledge to explicit knowledge (Hafeez & Alghatas 2007; Davenport & Prusak 1998).

Communities of Practice and the World Wide Web

General Implementation

The “virtual community,” which consists of a group of people with shared interests for whom computer-mediated communication is the primary mode of interaction (Dennis, Pootheri, & Natarajan 1998), is not a new phenomenon. Usenet newsgroups began in 1979 and are widely considered the earliest virtual communities on the Internet (Ridings and Gefen 2004). Increased Web usage also promoted an increase in types of computer-mediated communication – though not all of the methods in use today facilitate virtual communities. Virtual communities are not merely places in which people interact, such as chat rooms; there must exist some “permanence or consistency” among members and a continuity of participation (Ridings and Gefen 2004). The shift to the more interactive Web 2.0 environment has since encouraged the expansion of virtual communities; and as their reach has grown, so too has the virtual implementation of the CoP concept.

Communities of practice constructs were grounded in face-to-face interactions, but the ideology has been applied within the virtual realm. It is important to note that while online CoPs share many of the same characteristics as other types of virtual communities, the two are not synonymous. Online CoPs, which Wenger (2002) called
“distributed communities,” must still adhere to the same principles of domain, community and practice. Restler and Woolis (2007) further posited that online CoPs “involve a dispersed group of people who work together in a virtual environment (primarily but not exclusively) to achieve a specific objective within a defined time frame.” They have become more pervasive as organizations seek to utilize connective Web technology for innovative solutions. As Restler and Woolis (2007) noted, online CoPs have great potential:

At a click, community members can know who is, who can, who has, who knows, and who will. Supporting documentation, weblinks, newsfeeds, and more are available, and members can deploy powerful communication tools to distribute intelligence and leadership where knowledge is needed, as well as readily reframe it as necessary – a kind of knowledge recycling.

Thus far, literature analyzing online CoPs has produced mixed results and interpretations on the success of CoP concepts transferred to the virtual realm. Boulos, Maramba & Wheeler (2006) found that online CoPs related to the medical field aid clinicians in remote areas who lack training and support because of their geographic isolation from large hospitals and universities typically found in metropolitan centers. This connectivity was based on the medical “domain” and may indicates the clear foundation may be indicative of online CoP necessity.

Among the thematic variables both tested and debated is the importance of participation and a closely-related factor – motivation. Bettoni et al. (2007) found that
cultivation of knowledge should always rest on participation in knowledge: “applying knowledge requires a history of participation as a context for its interpretation.” Participation is related to community sustainability; as such, studies have investigated the motivations and expectations that drive community members to contribute information. Some found that “lack of motivation from a knowledge contributor impedes the knowledge sharing” (Chiu et al. 2006), while others argued that “participation” is a concept whose complexity extends beyond “logging on and posting.” Simply launching a technology-driven knowledge management tool is not enough to ensure active participation and knowledge sharing (Efimova 2004).

Bettoni et al. (2007) wrote that even with increased participation, online CoPs may lack sustainability: some fall apart soon after their initial launch, or they adopt a short-term, opportunity-driven behavior. Chiu et al. (2006) wrote that virtual CoPs differ from conventional organizations because there is no concrete reward system to reinforce the interactive mechanisms among participants. In order to solve these problems, Bettoni et al. (2007) argued, participation and cultivation must work in tandem to reciprocate knowledge stewarding, which in turn leads to practice.

Literature suggests that the most critical requirement for sustaining a successful online CoP is moderation or leadership (Restler & Woolis 2007, Moule 2004, Bettoni et al. 2007). More specifically, they noted, the leadership should emanate from someone “clearly identified as leading or helping to lead the organization” (Restler & Woolis 2007). A moderator or community member who assumes leadership can further drive the contributions of others in directions that are beneficial to the goals of the organization.
Such personal engagement is key to shifting the group’s thoughts (Restler & Woolis 2007). These findings inform Wenger et al.’s (2002) original construction of CoPs that outlines the development of community roles – including that of leaders.

Moule (2004) applied CoP framework to a study exploring healthcare students and E-learning. The study’s findings suggested that online CoPs have the potential to support the development of a shared understanding of professional practice and create relationships between members that can “work to the benefit of the community and those it serves” (Moule 2004). However, Moule (2004) also found that those wishing to apply CoP framework in the virtual realm should consider factors such as access to computers and technological literacy, group familiarity, allowing for the exploration of history and values, and linking group activities to improve engagement.

There also remains some contention about the capability of CoPs to reach optimal measures of learning success in the virtual realm. While communities of practice have thrived in the physical world, the paramount concepts of learning they embody may only operate effectively with face-to-face interaction:

True teaching and learning are about more than information and its transmission. Education is based on mentoring, internalization, identification, role modeling, guidance, socialization, interaction, and group activity. In these processes, physical proximity plays an important role. Thus, the strength of the future physical university lies less in pure information and more in college as a community … technology would augment, not substitute, and provide new tools for strengthening community on campus (Noam 1995).
Additionally, the lack of personal interaction may hinder the “trust” process that marks a successful community. Wenger (2002) suggested that trust is an important element in developing the “community,” principle, however, the presentation of different personas or identities online is not unusual (Tomes 2001) and this could present a problem for evaluating authenticity in an online CoP (Moule 2004). Conversely, Chiu et al. (2006) found that trust did not have a significant impact on quantity of knowledge-sharing, perhaps because “individuals are willing to share their personal knowledge due to close and frequent interaction among members, fairness in exchanging knowledge, and strong feelings towards the virtual community, without necessarily trusting other members in the virtual community.”

Different types of mechanisms have been studied as appropriate for facilitating online CoPs. Wikis, blogs, bulletin boards, e-mail lists and other vehicles have attempted to facilitate online CoPs. Restler & Woolis (2007) found that in today’s online CoP software market, there exist various options but “nothing works perfectly.” Schweitzer (2003) wrote that asynchronous discussion forums should be at the core of an online community of practice. His exploration of The Center for Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning finds that the future of online CoPs will echo the organizational foundation of historical Bulletin Board Systems. This position posits that blogs are simply a “growing trend” and may not necessarily be conducive to facilitating CoPs, but rather serve as a connective agent to the network of personal blogs that may share knowledge. Despite Schweitzer’s (2003) position, my research seeks to utilize blog technology to facilitate an online community of practice.
**Blogs as Online Communities of Practice**

Because of their connectivity, Web 2.0 tools have enabled an era of E-Learning and collaboration. Historically, blogs have existed as the Web 2.0 vehicle for the publishing of information by a single author. But they have since have evolved from their origins as “online diaries” into versatile self-publishing machines that carry a variety of functions – including knowledge management. The informality of blog systems provides the opportunity to capture and share knowledge where it is created.

The constitution of blogs also allows for the creation of a legitimate warehousing of captured knowledge, and archiving for later retrieval (Baush, Haughey & Hourihan 2002). Tags, previously described as an essential element of the blogging structure, are especially helpful in archiving knowledge into an easy, searchable form. They allow for “rapid terminological sharing and equilibration within communities of practice…” (Neumann & Prusak 2007). However, one problem that still remains is the potentially unstable constitution of the tagging system. As Neumann & Prusak (2007) noted, “a missing ingredient … is the need to guarantee persistence of documents and links; knowing that something seen one day will be there in a month or a year is fundamental to most business contracts.” The ephemeral nature of some Web material may hinder the ability to archive material and build knowledge centers; there is no guarantee that knowledge contributed “today” will still be accessible “tomorrow.”

There appear to be strong indicators of a growing cluster of public blogs used by professionals as personal knowledge repositories, learning journals or networking
instruments (Efimova 2004). Ives and Watlington (2005) wrote that “the simplicity of blogs with individual posts containing content and links, with a searchable archive, now gives us a tool for individual content management and a more effective tool for group communication than e-mail lists or discussion forums.” Blogs differ from early web tools such as usegroups because the information is streamlined more efficiently and can be both archived and distributed through RSS feeds. Additionally, Ives and Watlington (2005) illustrated the ability for organizations to permit their collective bodies to add commentary and thereby contribute to the “collective wisdom.” Efimova (2004) discussed communicative features becoming standard across the blogosphere. These features share commonalities with communities of practice principles, including: finding ideas and information, capturing, articulating and organizing ideas, initiating and following conversations. Within the sharing of collective wisdom, Efimova (2004) found that regular participation on blogs facilitates the development of more personal relations between blog authors.

Despite the potential blogs hold as a viable vehicle for online CoPs, few pieces of literature exist that specifically examine blogs as CoP mechanisms. One recent study focused on a previously established and generally successful CoP blog. Silva, Goel and Mousaviden (2007) conducted a study entitled “Exploring the dynamics of blog communities: the case of MetaFilter” in order to examine the social processes and mechanisms that give form to “community blogs” that also act as communities of practice. A community blog is one whose content is defined collectively and includes social dynamics such as the negotiation of identities, rules of membership, and purpose
and value of published content (Silva et al. 2007). The researchers examined textual data from the blog using a theoretical lens based on communities of practice literature and found the core practices – composing, posting, and reading comments – acted as the tacit knowledge that glued the community blog together (Silva et al. 2007). The study featured conclusions based in both theoretical and practical realms: first, it found that community blogs cannot exist without moderation; second, it found the exercise of disciplinary power by blog veterans is fundamental for community cohesion; third, it found that the profile and identity of participants became indicative for the quality of post; and last, it found that participants’ experiences recorded in the form of narratives are integrated into the posters’ identities. “All in all,” Silva et al. (2007) wrote, “this study has shown that communication technologies such as weblogs can be the media by which CoPs are constituted and can also be the media by which the identities of the individuals and the community as a whole are created and strengthened.” While this study examined a community blog with thousands of registered members and unlimited virtual reach, it still serves as a successful example of CoP blog and contains structural elements that my research seeks to emulate on a smaller scale.

The methodological perspective lacking in both studies that examine blogs as knowledge repositories and those that specifically focus on blogs that function as CoPs is that which is grounded in the formation and development of a CoP blog from its inception, rather than the systematic content analysis of retroactively posted material. Existing literature features studies of well-established community blogs – some with hundreds, and others with thousands of registered members – but none focused on
smaller, more concentrated groups. Indeed, it seems that studies have focused solely on community blogs that may happen to display CoP norms, rather than the methodical construction of a CoP blog from its inception. Also, scholars that determined a blog’s ability to house and transfer knowledge is explicit; however, none of the examined articles discuss the direct application of implicit knowledge shared on the blog transferred to tacit knowledge in the field. My research seeks to explore this largely under-researched evolution of CoP norms within a startup blog.

**Conclusion**

The background and literature discussed in this chapter explored the three theoretical constructs in which this study is rooted. The cultural and other communications theories highlighted the driving context that dominates some AmeriCorps work environments and underscored the lack of research that pertains to Americanized speech codes. I examined Web 2.0 technologies, particularly blogs, as the modern communicative vehicle for computer-mediated communication and studies that investigate their potential as learning tools. Finally, I outlined “community of practice” elements to illustrate the necessary ingredients for constructing a viable CoP, examined the existing CoP blog literature, and explained the missing methodological perspective that my study will rectify. Using these concepts, I will analyze how AmeriCorps members may develop community of practice norms while participating on a blog.
Chapter 4: Methodology

At the intersection of cultural communication, community of practice principles and modern Web technology lies a study rooted in interdisciplinary aspects. By connecting theoretical frameworks across the three fields, I sought answers to research questions whose solutions may improve the experiences of future AmeriCorps members:

• Can AmeriCorps members develop “community of practice” norms while communicating on a support blog?
• What motivates AmeriCorps members to participate (or not) on a support blog?

Communication can be both complicated and nuanced; as such, those who participated as data providers could not be classified as fixed variables. Research methods that explored these questions required the ability for qualitative analysis over a fixed number of weeks. The slow evolution of a non-connected, offline community into an interconnected, online community pointed to the most viable research method: ethnography.

The Ethnography of Communication

Ethnography is a field of study concerned primarily with the description and analysis of culture (Saville-Troike 2003). Johnson (2000: 111) defines ethnography as "a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do." Ethnography has since evolved since
its origins as the method anthropologists used to develop an understanding of cultures in distant places. It has been utilized within a wide range of substantive fields including urban life, the media, medicine, the classroom, science and technology (Hine 2000). During its evolution, however, many of its foundational principles have remained the same. The diversity of approaches to ethnography still shares a fundamental commitment to developing deep understanding through participation and observation (Hine 2000).

The ethnography of communication is a sub-study of the larger realm of ethnography that focuses on interactional analysis. It focuses on the “speech community,” the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which the interactants utilize them (Saviille-Troike 2003).

**Online ethnography**

As Internet access has escalated in the last decade, so too has the number of users who seek computer-mediated interaction. The increasing pervasiveness of online communication among dispersed groups of people with shared interests has launched a new sector of ethnographic research. Online ethnography was first dismissed as an inferior method to face-to-face communication because of the obstacles hindering the designing of studies that still featured pertinent ways of interacting with research subjects. Hine (2000) noted that ethnography has traditionally entailed physical travel to a place, which implies that face-to-face interaction is the most germane. Online ethnographers, therefore, must be willing to focus on experiential rather than physical
displacement (Hine 2000). Many studies have since explored digital communities, suggesting that social researchers cannot afford to continue the trends that sidestep digital methods in the future (Murthy 2008).

Data gathered from online communities bears increasing relevance in today’s mediascape, which often operates in both the digital and physical realms. Garcia et al. (2009) wrote that the disjunction between online and offline worlds is becoming less useful as activities in these realms interact, transform each other and further merge within our society. Due to the lack of physical presence, those who study online interaction can utilize both covert and overt methods: “Ethnographers in cyberspace can lurk in a way that face-to-face ethnographers cannot readily achieve” (Hine 2000). For some types of groups, all interaction between group members is online, therefore ethnographers can study the social life of those support communities solely by examining their online behavior (Garcia et al. 2009).

Online ethnographers still face obstacles – notably those concerning validity and identity. If a study exists exclusively in cyberspace, the researcher may not be able to validate the authenticity of both research subjects and the data collected. Therefore, some question the classification of online interactions as “authentic;” the ethnographer cannot readily confirm details that informants provide concerning their offline selves (Hine 2000). Additionally, online ethnographers cannot interpret body language, analyze tones of voice, or use other visual or auditory cues to inform their research. Instead, they must develop and be versed in skills that analyze textual and visual data, as well as the
interactional organization of text-based computer-mediated communication” (Garcia et al. 2009).

**Ethnography and CoP Norms**

I chose ethnography as this study’s methodology for several reasons. Ethnographies are typically born of research that focuses on the sociology of meaning within a particular community. As such, the “community” entered is typically well-established. In the case of this study, the AmeriCorps community was already established, but the blog community was not; I wanted to use ethnography to chronicle the evolution of a new, concentrated, online community’s evolution from its inception. Secondly, due to my position as an insider to the AmeriCorps community and subsequent inability to separate myself from the data, I surmised that the participant-observation method of data gathering paramount to the discipline would be applicable to this research. The participant-observer in the online realm is sometimes referred to as the “participant-experiencer” due to assuming a role as an active contributor to the group being studied (Garcia et al. 2009, Walstrom 2004).

Communities of practice have established norms, or, rules for interaction. This ethnography evaluates the norms of “domain,” “community” and “practice” and is further described in the measures section below.
Having extensive experience in both web design and using blogging platforms, I chose to construct a pilot study of an AmeriCorps CoP blog instead of investigating theoretical possibilities through survey data. I registered the domain “serveblog.org” and attached it to the domain I already own, d-roll.org. After some calculations that estimated the possible bandwidth use (the number of pageloads, or “hits” on a site that the server host allows per month) I determined that enough space existed to launch the blog using my existing host. Next, I downloaded the WordPress blog client and browsed the themes gallery. Choosing a theme is similar to designing a layout; while I typically prefer to design my own blog themes, I opted for pre-made due to time constraints. After finding a clean, structured design that could be altered to my liking, I designed a new header image using images from my own AmeriCorps service. During photography class, I lead a project with students on silhouetting images of themselves and figured if they were essentially the reason I had undertaken this thesis topic, it would be a nice tribute to use them in the header – no matter how anonymous.

I organized the blog’s layout by creating a “user guide” that remained a permanent page. On the sidebar, I added a search function, recent posts list, recent comments list, tag cloud, categories list, and calendar archives – all of which can be seen on the screen captures below.
Seeking downtime activities (the well is dry)
Feb 24th, 2009 by Jordan21. 2 comments (Edit)

Ok, everyone. It's time to address the other most difficult question in life besides the meaning of the universe. I'm desperately seeking some decent downtime activities for 12-15 year olds. Right now their favorites are fighting (and me breaking it up) and getting around our blocking software to their MySpace pages (lol).

We have a lot of options, but I feel like they can only go so far. Computer literacy games, computer reading games, learn-to-type software... puzzles, books, board games... we have all of this, and they do use them a lot. But sometimes they want to blow off steam (they're adolescents after all) and I can't let them get all crazy inside. We are located in a (very) urban area, and don't have too much of a "yard" to speak of, and also it's way too cold to be running around outside.

Is there anything you used or know of that you can suggest? I may even have a bit of money to spend from our activities budget. It doesn't necessarily have to be "academic" (in fact, maybe better if it isn't). Just activities that are safe and constructive for that age.

Impossible, right?
After receiving “screen name” preferences from blog participants, I registered each as a blog contributor, which granted them posting and commenting access. General access to the blog was password-protected and only permitted by study participants. The participants posted under the aforementioned aliases, or “screen names”; they are referred to in the ethnography by those screen names. Participants were offered the choice of keeping their material on after the blog finished or deleting it. The password will be lifted upon completion of this thesis, however, the blog’s future is undetermined.

Recruitment & Participants
Participants recruited for this study were required to meet specific criteria. To qualify, the candidate must either be currently serving in AmeriCorps*State & National or have previously served a full term. Additionally, the candidate must be serving or have served in the “education domain” – teaching, tutoring, mentoring, or other education-related placement. Restricting the sample to members placed in the education field allowed the pilot blog to test community of practice norms among a group working in similar fields. Those members who served in housing and urban development, for example, may not be equipped to participate or interested in reading specific advice on the best approaches to classroom management in an inner-city after school program.

Participants were also required to have regular Internet access and familiarity with Web 2.0 features such as blogs. Because of time restrictions, the training of participants in specific blog-posting skills, definitions of different features, and other means of access was not possible. Therefore, recruitment for the study took place entirely online, where possession of these skills is inherent. By identifying myself as a member of the AmeriCorps community, I established my authenticity in carrying out a study that may take up a considerable amount of the participants’ time. Garcia et al. (2009) cite this technique of identifying oneself as a member, or at least a sympathizer of the group being studied, is likely to yield more successful responses. Recruitment notices were posted (see Appendix 8.4) on AmeriCorps Facebook groups, and assumed that those who accessed Facebook would likely have familiarity with accessing other parts of the Internet. It also proved that they were online, so they would be able to access the blog.
A more in-depth study would call for the integration of members who are not already part of Web 2.0 social networks or other online communities.

Not including myself as the participant-observer, 11 subjects participated in the study, including 6 AmeriCorps alumni and 5 current members. The gender split was 7 women, 4 men, and the ages ranged from 22 to 40 with the average being 27. Eight participants described themselves as White or of European descent, while one participant each reported ethnicity as Asian-American, Latino, and mixed-race, respectively.

Participation occurred in three segments. First, participants took part in entrance interviews over e-mail. Having answered the final set of questions, participants received their respective requested “screen names” and instructions on accessing the blog. Open blog participation occurred over the ensuing four weeks. The final segment consisted of e-mail exit interviews.

Measures

The measures of analysis that inform my ethnography were derived from Dell Hymes “Models of interaction of language and social life” (1972). He warned there is no single best method of collecting information on the patterns of language use within a speech community, and that ethnographers should select field methods according to the occasion. For this study I utilized both participant-observation and in-depth interviewing.

The interviewing, which took place by e-mail before and after the open blog period, was “an efficient and perhaps necessary supplement to observation and participation”(Saville-Troike 2003). The questions asked of participants were both in-
depth and open-ended. The entrance interviews served to establish a background for the makeup of blog participants and examine the experience each respective member brought to the study. The exit interviews served to examine contextual data relating to certain blog behaviors, as well as the motivation for level of participation. Interviews were constructed and coded based on James Spradley’s *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979). Both sets of data informed the analysis described throughout the ethnography.

Hymes (1972) suggests three units used to analyze communication, one of which is the “communicative event.” Throughout the four weeks of open blog participation, I recorded detailed ethnographic “field notes” of participants’ daily activities. In the case of this blog, the posts and comments combined to make series of communicative events. Within that unit of analysis, data were further analyzed on a textual level by coding the interactions according to Hymes’ (1972) components of communication. This ethnography was coded using the components of “purpose” and “message content” to identify thematic norms associated with communities of practice.
Chapter 5: Results

Over the four-week open blog period, participants started 31 new posts and contributed 137 comments. Posts were classified into 37 tags and 12 categories. Of the 11 participants, 8 posted at least one time on the blog. Of the three who did not post, one reported logging in at least once to read the material. Participants included: Amerigeek, 40, alumnus; bluebro, 23, current; Buckets, 28, alumnus; Change09, 23, current; Jordan23, 24, current; mariedawson, (age not reported), alumnus; omega336, 22, current; prospector, 28, alumnus; rachel45, 24, alumnus; river_run, 24, current; and sprichsprach, 24, alumnus. The ethnography analyzes communicative acts within the blog and is informed by interwoven data gathered from entrance and exit interviews. Any quotes lifted from the blog are italicized; the quotes presented are what I considered to be most representative of the data.

The Story of Serveblog.org

Having gathered the essential ingredients to create an online community of practice – a group of alums and current members (community) who all served in the AmeriCorps education realm (domain) and were willing to interact and share support and knowledge (practice) – all that remained was the act of mixing it up in a large bowl, baking it for 35 minutes at 400 degrees and hoping the concoction turned golden brown. But as I learned over the ensuing four weeks of formal interaction, any metaphorical
comparison the study may have had with baking a cake ended at “mix.” The participants were not flour and baking soda, bound to predictable chemical reactions upon the application of time and heat. They had busy lives, inquiring minds, and varying motivations of their own that were entirely uncontrollable by me as the researcher. As such, the nonlinear development of community norms and interactions within the blog made my daily observations and interactions interesting, but also made the ethnography more challenging to construct.

A 100% response rate for entrance interviews provided pertinent background details on the makeup of the participants. According to their interviews, the group did not simply account for those seeking support and information; many of the participants reported having little difficulty during their service and were eager to share their successes and strategies with others. Conversely, the interviews did reveal a near-consensus response that members did not receive sufficient training or preparation by AmeriCorps or their assigned program prior to entering their service community. I asked participants to recall specific examples of communicative challenges they faced in order to evaluate how the communication of struggles and doubts may – or may not – develop into blog topics or used in other supportive mechanisms.

Similarly, exit interviews also provided insight on situational factors, various levels of participant motivation, and other factors relating to the construction and ideals of the community. Of the 11 participants who began the study, six participated regularly (at least four posts per week), two participated rarely (less than four total posts), and three did not participate on the blog. Unfortunately, all three who did not post also did not
respond to requests for exit interviews that would have explored their reasons for not participating, and whether or not they had signed on, but simply “lurked” instead of posted. Those who rarely participated did respond with information that explained a noticeably smaller blog presence; their motivation, along with that of the regular posters, is examined at further points in this chapter.

**Starting Out & Speech Codes**

Like firing the proverbial starting gun, I sent a “blog launch” e-mail to participants that included the web address, access password and instructions to visit the “user guide” page upon logging in. The user guide provided more specific instructions on how to create posts, categories and tags. It also reminded participants not to post identifying information about themselves or the places in which they served or are serving. Lastly, the user guide briefly explained that the evolution of the community was left to them; I would be participating occasionally, but they should not look to me as “teacher” or “discussion leader.” It had been a major concern of mine that should I post too frequently, the participants may hesitate or simply refrain from creating new posts themselves because of complacency with following my lead. As such, I resisted in creating any new posts aside from administrative notes and limited my participant-observer role to observing and commenting.

I started the first post as the place for generic introductions. Computer-mediated communication is similar to traditional interaction – at least in American culture – in that upon their first meeting, strangers typically seek out commonalities. Making, at the very
least, small connections, encourages further relational development. Because of the
entrance interviews, I already knew each participant’s answer my question, but needed to
establish this information publicly to start the community-building. I hoped that the
participants would respond and find some service details they shared in common:

Representing...

by danielle.

Where and when did everyone serve? Who’s in right now?

I worked in Washington, DC during 2006-2007 with low income, African
American teenagers at a housing project.

Four participants answered within a few hours—bluebro, Buckets, river_run, and
Jordan23. Their answers followed a similar construction as mine—service year,
location, and general population served. Three posters found commonalities right away:

Buckets says:

2005-2006 in Columbus, OH. I also worked with low income African American
teenagers (also a few 12 year olds, but who’s counting?). What kind of work did
you do, Danielle?

bluebro says:

I’m in right now...started in August. I’m also in DC! Mostly I do after school
things with kids 8-14 in Southeast.

Jordan23 says:
bluebro, that's exactly what I do except in Chicago. I'm also in right now.

I responded to Buckets’ inquiry and briefly described my service responsibilities, mentioning that my program manager expected me to be what I termed a “jack of all trades.” She replied that “[she] felt the same way!!” and said that we could “talk about it later.” Buckets’ latter statement indicated both an open desire to participate “later” and also a blogging norm that frowns upon “off topic” conversations within posts. Since the post was for introductions, her comment suggested she knew any conversation about job responsibilities should occur in its own thread.

After only four responses to the introductory post, bluebro, a current member, created the first original post of any participant. He acknowledged that we appeared to be in an introductory phase and realized that may be violating the emerging group norms:

Don’t let my quick posting stop anyone from doing their intros, but I thought I’d just jump right in. I’m going to be honest here — this thing couldn’t have come at a better time. I am really struggling right now and I feel like nobody else in my sub-group is having the same issues I am, so I hope some of you have ideas for me.

I expected the topic to emerge at some point – after all, the theoretical construct that served to justify the necessity for this information and support blog for teachers in the AmeriCorps environment was grounded in speech codes and speech communities literature – but I was shocked that it appeared within a day of launching the blog.

Bluebro’s post continued:
I just started with a new group of after school kids (4th and 5th grade) and am supposed to do reading “games” on the computers with them. But I can’t get them to sit still for 5 minutes! I know kids are going to be rambunctious, but this has gone beyond bad classroom management and into downright disrespect for me. I’ve worked with this age group before and I thought I knew all the tricks... but apparently not. At times I feel like they are speaking a different language than me, there are so many inside jokes and what I’ve termed ‘neighborhoodisms.’ Does anyone else have (dis)respect issues with kids?

In one simple paragraph, bluebro illustrated the challenges AmeriCorps members face in seeking solutions to communications difficulties within their service environments. His admittance that he feels as if the youth are “speaking a different language” and have “inside jokes” and “neighborhoodisms” all indicate his position as an outsider to their speech community. He, perhaps mistakenly, has blamed this on the disrespectful nature of children, and did not realize that a distrust component may be more responsible. Buckets and Amerigeek responded by saying they too faced the same problems during their service, and then provided the first pieces of knowledge transfer. They did not address the speech codes issue so much as suggested strategies for motivating the students en route to earning their respect. Amerigeek, in what would be the first of many long, articulate and thoughtful responses, relayed some of her specific experience:
I had as little experience working with kids as you can get without growing up in a monastery, and I’m not sure I ever figured it out. But it seems to me that the only real way to deal with kids (or anybody, for that matter, but especially kids) is to dial into their mental radio channel of W-IIFM (what’s in it for me). If you can make it worth their while, according to their own definition of such, they’ll do it. Any externally imposed ‘whys’, however, are less than worthless unless they coincide with the kids’ own motivations.

Bluebro replied by acknowledging that “W-IIFM” was a “great way of putting it” but that he did not know how to relate it on the youth’s level. Amerigeek once again responded with a lengthy comment that included contextual information from her past experiences and ended with specific strategies:

Even today, if it pushes that button, there’s a good chance I’ll cross hell & high water to do it. So what do your kids want? And remember, it’s likely to be different for each kid. Maybe you give points for each minute of work done, and the kids can turn in points for rewards that match their own interests - one might want dibs on a certain toy, while another is motivated by being allowed to tell jokes during lunch hour and be recognized for their funniness, while still another wants to trade points in for a new set of crayons. Not sure how much leeway you have with such things, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask the kids what they want, and see if there’s any way at all to adapt your rewards to their desires.
Interestingly, Buckets responded with a line that surprised me almost as much as the post’s original content. She called Amerigeeek’s response “some amazing insight” and then wondered if “there’s a better way we can organize all of this (I mean, beyond the categories).” I thought the natural evolution of a community of practice saw the “community” develop before the “practice,” but already Buckets indicated the desire to take the knowledge transfer and make it more accessible and organized. She then shared another strategy that bluebro may consider trying and concluded that, “if you just turn ‘their weapons’ into ‘your weapons’ you may find more success.”

Both the immediate sharing of personal experience and strategies and the foresight to organize the information shared were surprising developments. However, when considering the background information collected during entrance interviews, it is entirely unsurprising that bluebro wasted little time in seeking concrete solutions. He gave no indication that he was interested in developing relationships, nor did he profess any qualms about seeking support: “I’m doing [this study] because I need to. It’s been hard, and I don’t know where else to ask for help.” The early development of best practices grounded in speech codes theory posed logistical problems for me. I possessed both experience in the area and a similar Washington, DC-based service point of view to bluebro’s. But because it was the first “strategy” post, I did not want to overshadow the responses of the participants and set a precedent as me as the expert. This seemed ideologically counterproductive to the goals of the blog – a current member needed strategies and I chose not to provide any. But considering the overall “health” of the blog, I found it necessary on this occasion. This community had only started – rules and
norms for its operation were still in the developmental phase. Perhaps if Amerigeek and Buckets had not provided sound strategies, I may have relented and posted regardless.

While bluebro sought answers to his frustrations with respect and motivation issues, Amerigeek took a paradoxical step in the blog’s evolution. It seemed that with problems being addressed and knowledge being shared, the blog had all but glossed over the introductory phase. This seemed troublesome from the basis of natural community evolution; in her exit interview, Amerigeek agreed, saying that she felt it was important to get to know the people behind the posts during online communication. “When you're posting blind,” she said, “it's easy to misunderstand motivations, make assumptions and miss out on opportunities for growth and conversation that could have otherwise been open to you.” I was interested to see if sharing information with “strangers” would become tiresome for members and decrease as the weeks progressed. However, Amerigeek reverted back to the introductory phase and started a post devoted to introducing herself and providing “off topic” details:

I’m a web geek, a blogger and a professional writer currently specializing in the personal development field. I love sci-fi, role playing games and cats (the geek trifecta), I’m a foodie and I’m a make/craft/DIY geek. Other loves include LOLcats, science, gardening, crime dramas, books, and sustainable/green/eco stuff. My role models include Cory Doctorow (geek role model), Ben Franklin (the original MAKE’er and self-made dude), John Scalzi (professional role model), MacGyver (geeky, crafty and non-violent…swoon), and the Dalai Lama
(role model for practical and pragmatic self-growth through self-honesty, compassion, humor and big brass...bells, yeah, bells, that’s it).

Her self-revelation as a “web geek” and “blogger” immediately granted immediate legitimacy to her posts. She ended the section with a bit of humor:

If I say any more about myself, apparently I’ll have to kill you, so that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. You may extrapolate onward from those tidbits as you please. :-D

I suspected her motivation for posting such a lengthy, “off-topic” type of introduction – and immediately posted a response, which turned into a bit of 1990s science fiction television banter between the two of us; this essentially signaled to the rest of the blog population that what she posted was allowed – and even encouraged. Later, Amerigeek confirmed my suspicions on her reasons for posting:

In an online setting, it's easy to blow past the ‘What's your name, what do you do, who are you’ preliminaries that we otherwise consider necessary foundation-building in face-to-face conversation - indeed, we often find it uncomfortable to talk to someone for any length of time in "real life" without knowing these things, because that information helps orient us and direct the conversation. I wanted to make sure that process was not shortcut in this setting, especially given our time constraints.

Such a confident, positive and welcoming post from a fellow participant established a precedent. Six of the seven remaining participants who ultimately posted
on the blog followed with their own individual introductory posts in what became an impressive foundation to the community and established Amerigeek as the emergent leader.

**Return to Speech Codes**

Amerigeek’s in-depth introductory phase was preceded by bluebro’s speech codes-related inquiry – and was then followed by river_run’s similarly-themed inquiry to complete the cultural communicative bookends. Her post essentially was an inquiry about speech codes and cultural speech communities. Again, however, the poster did not use these academic terms – though in this case she recognized that the concept may be “theoretical”:

*Culture: Language vs “Language”*

by river_run.

I hope nobody is going to be scared off by this sort of theoretical topic (I have enjoyed reading the post below about concrete strategies for respect/motivation). My community population is largely Spanish-speaking. While I do speak pretty decent Spanish, what I have the most problems with is that other “language” they use. It’s not necessarily slang, but I’ve noticed that the way the kids interact with each other is pretty different from how I grew up. It’s a lot more familial, and it’s hard to get anyone to take individual responsibility. For example, if an incident happens on the playground and say, a toy gets broken, there aren’t any tattle-tales — EVER. That doesn’t seem normal for a bunch of 7 year olds. It’s like
they all pull together and are against ME, instead of the usual wanting to be on the good side of the teacher. Does that make sense? That’s just one simple example... but I find it difficult to explain. I’m wondering if any of you are also running into a “cultural language” barrier and how you can better understand it?

Buckets says:

I think you brought up one of the biggest problems with AmeriCorps preparing us for these service years. Did you have any specific training in your program? Did anyone? I was going into an African American community where everybody speaks English. But it wasn’t English that was the problem. I had the same struggles with trying to understand the different ways kids interacted that seemed different from how I did. Especially in working with teenagers, that made it hard. We all spoke the same language, but we didn’t! ...

AmerigEEK says:

At the end of my program year, I do know our program was looking into the feasibility of restructuring the yearly schedule so that the programs overlapped at the end/beginning, to create some sort of continuity for the kids and to prevent that “learn how to swim once you hit the water” thing that Americorps is famous for doing to program members. Not sure that ever went anywhere, but I do think it’s an idea that has merit.
That was my problem both years I served - getting up to speed and functional took the better part of the first half of the service year, so you only get about 6 months of real progress. But all that progress is lost when you leave, because the next year’s group has to start where you did. I feel it’s one of the biggest flaws in the structure of the program. I can’t tell you how much further we would have gotten if last year’s team had been working alongside us for the first month or so…

River_run’s post may have stemmed from her admittance during her entrance interview that she is “still not comfortable with my own communication style and even with support from my co-workers, I don’t feel like I am completely myself teaching. I need more time to understand everything.” Jordan23 and prospector also voiced their agreement in the comments that they find it difficult to work their way “into” communities. Jordan23 mentioned in his exit interview that even though he was still having trouble communicating with his service group, “it makes me feel a little bit better that it’s not just me, and that it’s not something that I am doing wrong. It looks like everyone had or is having trouble with that.” Amerigeek noted that racial differences caused her to use “conversational self-censorship, where you’re afraid of saying the wrong thing on accident, so you’re always filtering what you say through your strongest ‘neutral language filter’ … which creates an unconsciously tense and distant conversational style that doesn’t exactly help things.”

One participant revealed confidence in dealing with such situations because of her anthropology background: “I also had experience working in inner cities and although I
knew that some issues related to being low income would be similar to the suburban/rural population I was about to work with- I didn't have the personal safety concerns that I had going into city neighborhoods. I also had the educational background in anthropology and I felt that provided me with the perspective of being a participant observer and felt that my desire to learn from the community would also allow me to bond as well,” she said. Unfortunately for the rest of the blog members, this participant did not post during the four-week blog phase, nor did she respond to requests for an exit interview that would have explored participation motivation – or lack thereof. However, the overall successful service year she experienced – her entrance interview was laden with praise for employees at her placement site, calling them “supportive and helpful” – suggests she may not have possessed empathetic motivation similar to that revealed by other participants.

**Knowledge-Sharing & Support**

Community of practice norms further appeared in many of the blog’s communicative acts. In one post, *Jordan23* sought specific “indoor downtime activities” for teenagers. I relayed my successful experience playing foosball during my service, and how I also used it as the proverbial “stick” to the homework “carrot.” Then I directed *Jordan23* to Craigslist where he may find a cheap – or free – used table. Similarly, *Amerigeek* suggested his program investigate purchasing Dance Dance Revolution. *Jordan23* returned to the thread and reported that he found a foosball table on Craigslist for under $50, and that he would discuss obtaining it with his supervisor.
He also asked *Amerigeek* for clarification on what exactly Dance Dance Revolution was, to which she quickly responded by saying it was “*a bit like Rock Band, but with dancing*” and provided links to YouTube videos of amputees playing and men using the game while juggling. This communicative act featured the obvious demonstration of “practice” – the sharing of knowledge and its implementation into action. It also displayed the contextual understanding that the AmeriCorps community has for suggesting appropriate activities. While board games and puzzles may work in some circumstances, inner-city teenagers are often sequestered inside because the neighborhood lacks space or safe outdoor alternatives. Both foosball and “DDR” would allow their youthful energy to be channeled in a safe manner.

While many other posts also sought specific solutions, some had little to do with search for strategies, but rather devotion to the AmeriCorps domain in general. Several posts served as communicative acts in which members discussed elements of the AmeriCorps community at large. For example, *Amerigeek* posted her ideas for an AmeriCorps guide book and asked members for their opinions; *sprichsprach* wondered about second jobs, self-care, and other “non-service” aspects of the AmeriCorps experience; and *Jordan23* polled the blog members on what drove them to join AmeriCorps. Each of these posts produced numerous comments, suggesting that blog members are devoted to and interested in the general domain of AmeriCorps and the education realm. *Sprichsprach* later expanded on the experience of interacting within the AmeriCorps education domain: “It was nice to have a commonality (type of work) in the group. There are already so many other variables (just each of our experiences,
backgrounds, environment, etc) that having a constant allowed us to focus and help each other in a way that might have not been as productive had we been in completely different fields.”

The trust element crucial to community-building had been difficult to gauge throughout the blog period. It seemed that participants were self-divulging many of their service anecdotes without hesitation. However, one member appeared to begin restricting her posting; in the latter part of the study, I noticed a drop-off in posts from river_run. She initially seemed eager to interact and discuss her current service before all but disappearing from the commenting threads. Finally, several days after Amerigeek’s post about her book idea, river_run began a topic that stemmed from something Amerigeek had posted:

“Unpleasant realities like...

by river_run.

...February Burnout Syndrome.”

This is something Amerigeek mentioned as covering in her book idea, and ever since reading that... I’ve been thinking that maybe it’s happening to me. I don’t feel like anyone else I know in AmeriCorps is having the same issue, so I thought I was just doing something wrong. But is this common? Over the last month I’ve just felt a lot more... useless at my job, not seeing a lot of good work being done, getting a little homesick, etc. I don’t feel “burnt out” necessarily, but just... the opposite of how I felt when I started. I go back to “useless” again. Did this happen to anyone else? I get the feeling that it does, if Amerigeek actually has a
name for it. How am I supposed to feel about it and what should I do? It’s so hard to explain, other than “BLAH!” lol, I feel like I’m at group therapy. :( ???

She received six responses, unanimous in their assertion that it “wasn’t just [her]” and that it happened to all of them as well. River_run appeared to be seeking both a solution to the problem and consolation that it was not abnormal. She later expanded on the topic during her interview and clarified her reasoning:

I learned over time that I wouldn’t be judged. I think it stemmed from the post about our reasons for joining AmeriCorps. A couple people weren’t embarrassed that they didn’t sign up because they wanted to help people or save the world or something, instead they just wanted a job. The reaction they got from that was not mean or judgmental, like it was ok. So then I thought that if I posted about getting burnout that it would be ok too.

First, this suggests her communicative act was for support purposes, not solution purposes. This blog does not simply have to remain an information dumping ground.

Second, this suggests that river_run learned over the course of reading blog posts that she “wouldn’t be judged” because other posters admitted they joined for less than idealistic purposes. This displays an overt element of openness and trust that is not always visible in other posts, and suggests the blog is further developing CoP “community” norms.
Emerging CoP Norms: “Good Night, and Pot Luck”

The first two weeks of the blog saw different instances in which CoP norms appeared in various communicative acts. However, the final two weeks featured a series of posts that began featuring all three essential norms concurrently. This development of the CoP norms “holy trinity” materialized during an ongoing saga involving bluebro that, after a while, I began referring to as “Good Night, and Pot Luck” in my field notes. There had emerged a sense that everyone who regularly participated seemed to contribute knowledge, share personal experiences and generate topics that required responses from others. In essence, most regular posters were employing a “complete” experience; bluebro, however, mostly lingered on the “receiving” end. I somewhat expected this, as he had revealed in his entrance interview: “Nobody likes the needy guy, but I need a lot of help.” Still, I hesitate in referring to bluebro as the blog’s perpetual needy member, because the term typically carries negative connotation. I am nothing if not empathetic to his struggles – not only because his placement is working with Washington, DC youth, but also because I recall facing some eerily similar scenarios (including that which is featured in the forthcoming section) and had not but my own inadequate wits for support. More often than not, when bluebro posted, he needed help; it was not a case of blowing simple issues out of proportion for the sake of starting posts.

With community roles seemingly emerging, he did not want to always appear, as he said later, “the guy who didn’t know how to do anything.” I could sense his perceived inadequacy through certain textual speech acts, especially the consistent use of “LOL” or “haha” after comments, as if self-deprecation were his main defense mechanism. My
observation was more conspicuously confirmed when he tacked a quasi-disclaimer at the beginning of one post: “I promise by the end of these few weeks I will have contributed something helpful to someone, but here I am again, asking for YOUR help.”

The post, which initiated the “Good Night, and Pot Luck” saga, was titled “Strategy All-Call: Parents.” I noticed bluebro had created a new tag along with the post – “all call.” When I asked about the all-call tag later, he said it “was an attempt to get an answer from everyone, because the more answers the better, right?” In the post, he talked about the difficulties he has faced in cajoling parents and guardians to take interest in their children’s participation in their program – especially in trying to reach them for various reasons:

Sometimes I’ll need to contact them because of permission for field trips, or because of behavior issues and that type of things. Sometimes I just want to tell a parent that their kid did something great. But here, I can’t even REACH a parent on the phone, let alone speak with them on it. They don’t answer because they think it’s a creditor or some other person of authority. Sometimes the lines are constantly busy or disconnected completely.

When I ask the kids about how to get in touch, I usually am given some line about them not getting into their [mother]’s business (and neither should I). Then there are all the rumors flying around about who’s the crack addict and who’s got 14 people living in a 2 room apartment… rumors that I never would have believed four months ago but now I do. Long story short, it all contributes to my frustration for not being able to establish some kind of contact with the people
raising these kids. I think it would help them, it would help me.... it would just help.

Anyway, sorry for the really rambling post, but does anyone have suggestions? Anything you alums did? Or is this totally out of my control? Is it normal?

Jordan23, who also currently works in an inner-city housing complex, responded quickly with candid advice:

You can only control what you can control. I went back to your intro post and stop me if I’m making an incorrect assumption — but you don’t have a teaching background? One of the things I learned in my education training was although the ideal situation will have the parents working in tandem with your goals (like helping with homework, being aware of activities, etc) doesn’t happen as often as you’d like. And in the low-income settings, you often have parents working 2 or 3 jobs, taking care of extended families, priorities that are more immediate than what one of their children is doing at school/after school. You might as well go in with the assumption that parents won’t be of help — period. That may sound cynical, but it’ll help your thinking/strategizing to have that defense in place. You just have to make sure that the time you are working with the kids is the best you can do. That’s what you can control.

Amerigeek chimed in by saying that problems with parents were “one of biggest program-related gripes in my last year of service.” The remainder of the comments thread featured some back-and-forth agreements on the difficulty of the situation, but
more interestingly, included a break from the formality of previous knowledge 
exchanges. Pop culture analogies, frank questions, and sudden confidence combined to 
form one of the most conversationally natural exchanges thus far:

*Buckets* says:

*Ok, this is when I put my geekness on total display. I learned like Jordan23 did, 
and will use the words of Gandalf from Lord of the Rings: “all you have to do is 
decide what to do with the time that is given to you.” You can’t control the 
parents, but you can do your best with the time with them you have.*

*bluebro* says:

*Hahahaha!! I love that movie. Thanks Buckets! Amerigeek - our program is also 
literally right next door, and that’s what makes it so frustrating! I really want to 
just go and start knocking on their doors, but I don’t think the people in the 
neighborhood trust me enough yet to do that. It’s so hard.*

*Amerigeek* says:

*bluebro, how can they trust you if they don’t get to know you? LOL. 
I don’t know your situation, but knocking on doors just might work. Or not. But if 
not, you’re no worse off than you are now, right?*

*bluebro* says:
LOL. It’s the worst kind of conundrum. I really think I’ll start doing it... I’ll take a friendly kid along for moral support. Seriously, I’m gonna do this next week. And then I can tell all of you the horribly awesome/awesomely horrible details.

*Amerigeek says:*

*grabs bowl of popcorn*

*Buckets* immediately disarmed *bluebro*’s apprehension with a pop culture reference. I asked her about that specific instance in her exit interview and she replied that she remembered *Jordan23*’s preceding post as being true, but with a very serious tone. “I wanted to put in some humor because I think it makes certain situations easier to handle and you can better understand things,” *Buckets* said. It appeared to work – *bluebro* got a “hahaha” out of it, which lead to his responding to *Amerigeek*’s ideas, which finally lead to his decision to venture into the neighborhood to talk with parents. *Bluebro*’s declaration is another example of best practices shared in the online realm turned into actionable knowledge. Not only is he going to attempt the knocking of doors, but he also mentioned returning to the blog and sharing the details of the experience with his fellow posters. Although he once again hides behind a bit of self-deprecation (“horribly awesome/awesomely horrible”), *bluebro* has more or less acknowledged *Amerigeek*’s glib question – “how can they trust you if they don’t get to know you?” – as valid. *Amerigeek*’s use of an action phrase surrounded by asterisks is a method for signifying the poster is committing that action. In this case, *Amerigeek* is not literally
grabbing a bowl of popcorn, but rather telling bluebro in a humorous manner that she expects this to be entertaining and that perhaps she is even looking forward to reading about it. Then, sprichsprach shared a lengthy anecdote that included additional strategies that tied into what previous posters suggested, along with the encouragement to keep trying in the face of inevitable frustration:

**sprichsprach** says:

I, also, served in a tutoring center that was right in the middle of the population we served. I was a late-comer to my AC program, so I missed the initial sign-up period for the tutoring center for the school year (which involved knocking on doors and talking to parents/guardians on the phone). My supervisor was pretty well-established in the community, so I got a lot of strange looks and parents thinking, “who are you and why should I listen to you?”

On top of it all, many of the parents did not speak English! Getting parents involved was always a difficult task.

Of course it’s ideal to have holistic involvement (parents, teachers, etc.), but a huge reason we existed was that the parents COULDN’T help the kids in school because of time constraints, language barriers, and lack of education.

It took me a while to “get out there” on my own, but my supervisor purposefully sent me out on small tasks around the neighborhood to get my face out there and make me make the effort to get to know the families. So there I was, knocking on doors and windows, calling houses/cell phones, making these families answer their doors and phones for me. I found that being persistent, asking when was a
good time to come over/back (and actually showing up or calling then) was important. I also realized I had to be flexible, knowing that I could not always expect their full attention (we would talk while they were cooking dinner or watching the kids), knowing that things may get lost in translation (I often spoke to an English-speaking aunt/cousin/older-sibling so I would make sure things were simple, but insisted that they translated everything), and knowing that I wasn’t going to be able to connect with everyone (but embracing and being thankful for the ones I did get through to).

There was a lot of trust in the neighborhood regarding the tutoring center, so that was nice, but it also meant that parents didn’t feel as obligated to come by and hang out when we had events. We invited them to everything — seasonal parties, movie nights, and other events. Toward the end of my time at the center, I recruited some of the bilingual parents (from the different language groups we served) and had them help me “spread the word” about things I needed (getting food for potlucks, permission slips signed, etc). I realized that the culture of our families was very much an oral culture, and “word of mouth” was the way to go. I wouldn’t say I totally “figured it out”, but I kept trying different methods and trying to understand why something worked/didn’t work, and never gave up.

You can do it! *cheerleading over*

bluebro says:
Wow, thanks sprichsprach! I’m still a little nervous about trying this (my supervisor is also known in the community but isn’t sympathetic to my struggles for some frustrating reason) but I’ll try to be persistent... and I will be back with the details, lol. Maybe this’ll be my new ongoing project (I seriously need a victory, here...) 

Bluebro’s “wow” to sprichsprach stemmed from, as he said later, “genuine surprise that people would take that kind of time to write out helpful answers.” What became especially apparent through sprichsprach’s and other responses to bluebro during this segment was the interlacing of support within the communicative acts; they were not simply transferring knowledge. In this unique context, the populations that members serve are always the “unknown variables.” Certain methods that may work for a housing project in Seattle may not be effective in DC; or it may be effective in one part of DC and not another. Therefore, the undercurrent of support, encouragement and phrases like, “you can do it! *cheerleading over*” appears to add an extra, necessary element to AmeriCorps CoP norms.

Two days after bluebro’s “Parents All-Call,” he shared his plan to take the knowledge gained on the blog and put it into practice. In a fresh post, he wrote:

Here we go...

by bluebro.

Tomorrow I’m taking a kid along and we’re knocking on doors to invite parents and siblings and cousins and whoever else to our program’s Pot Luck Dinner on
Friday. I am irrationally afraid of this already, but I appreciate all the advice in
the post down below (and any last-minute tips would not be discouraged, lol :D )
I’ll let you know how it turns out.

The post received two relatively quick responses that included, for the most part,
words of encouragement; then I followed with a post that linked to my old AmeriCorps
blog:

**sprichsprach** says:

It’ll be great! I always felt such a connection when I roamed my community. Not
every door you knock on is going to welcoming. Not every door will open. But
there WILL be a door, at least one person, one family, that will show up because
of you and your efforts!!! You’re obviously a passionate person to be doing what
your doing, so let that passion lead you! Good luck and best wishes!

**river_run** says:

Taking a kid along with you is a good idea — kinda like a buffer. And
sprichsprach is right — even if just ONE more shows up because of your effort,
it’ll be so worth it. Good luck.

**danielle** says:

“Irrationally afraid?” Hardly. Read this when you have a free ten minutes.

http://d-roll.org/blog/?p=64
As I previously mentioned, the similarities in challenges faced by bluebro to that of my own service were more than apparent at times. It bothered me that he felt “irrationally” afraid – when there was nothing “irrational” about it. But then I remembered a time when I was told to deliver camp flyers door-to-door – alone – and had definitely felt scared for no apparent reason. I had written a blog entry about it and directed bluebro that way through a link in hopes that he would realize his fears were not unique; nor did they make him an inadequate service member. Linking to outside source material as I did proved to be an uncommon occurrence throughout the blog phase, however, I suspect that should this blog operate in the future – free from the self-contained limitations imposed by the academic nature of this study – more linking to outside material will occur.

When a full day had passed and there was no word from bluebro on his quest to meet parents, two participants actually noticed and posted as such:

_Amerigeeek says:_

_Soooo...how did it go? *Bated breath and everything...*_

_Buckets says:_

_Well??_

There appeared to be an investment in the event by the evolving community. _Bluebro_ finally returned with an update the following day. In a post titled “Meet the
Parents,” he said: “My adventure was nearly as funny as that movie. I went two days in a row and worked one side of the complex yesterday and one side today. I took a list of known apartment numbers of people who are or had signed up for the program, and a blabbermouth kid who told me where the unlisted people live. I also printed off a flyer with the potluck details on it so I could leave something at the door if they didn’t answer or give them something if they did.”

The rest of the post included bullet points on the different kinds of reactions he received, which was followed by more specific details of the encounters. The recap related to another element of speech codes when he said, “The worst of course was when they got outwardly annoyed or angry. The weird part was that the majority of anger and annoyance was directed at my “assistant” kid as he enjoyed being called. One man said to him, “You triflin bringin the damn feds up here.” It was like he should know better than to bring the outsider into the innermost part of the community.” He also described his few “victories,” which included “so and so’s aunt” who already knew about the event and was making a dish, some “maybes,” and “some people who took the flyer with genuine interest.”

The other participants’ responses to his recap congratulated him on “getting out there,” and many of the posters wondered if he experienced an increase in confidence. Several days later, sprichsprach returned and posted again, eager to hear about the results of bluebro’s canvassing efforts: “So when is this event? Has it already happened? I’m eager to hear all about it. Do you think “word of mouth” would work in your neighborhood? I think the fliers are a good idea. Just a little extra something to leave
behind!” As with the previous post, the participants displayed a growing devotion to not only providing specific strategies to increase the success of the collective domain, but also interest and concern for the success of their fellow members – particularly bluebro. The next day, bluebro returned and updated the blog on the saga’s end:

**bluebro says:**

Thanks guys. I do feel more confident. Maybe it was more fear of the unknown before rather than fear of failure (because I did that plenty of times) because now I feel like I can do it again despite knowing the same thing will probably happen. The pot luck was good, it was last Friday. We made most of the food (whereas at a typical Pot Luck everyone is supposed to bring something) but the point was more to get people in the door and hear about our program. It was half for recruitment and half just a fun event for the participants and their families. I saw two of the adults I talked with while knocking on doors. They didn’t approach me and I didn’t get a chance to speak with them, but it was nice seeing them there. Even if it was only two extra!

“Good Night, and Pot Luck” demonstrated the complete potential for this blog to operate as an online CoP for AmeriCorps members. Not only did it feature all three CoP norms within communicative acts, but each complimented the other en route to actionable knowledge in the field: from the initial idea conception, to the responses that were encouraging, informative and rife with anecdotal and implicit knowledge, to the application in practice, to the vested interest in the results, and to the overall support of
success. Furthermore, the communicative act that followed several days later displayed a natural flow hallmark to an online community: *Jordan23* created a post wondering if anyone had other ideas for other kinds of community events, because “*in reading about bluebro’s adventures with recruiting parents and family/friends to their pot luck dinner, it made me wonder why we’ve never done something like that which involves more of the community. It would be good exposure, a fun time, and a way to bring new people in or get family/parents involved.*” Face-to-face conversations have natural ebbs and flows in which topics naturally lead to other topics – a norm not easily translated to computer mediated communication. However, I believe it was a sign of a community advancing through the stages of development when *Jordan23* used *bluebro’s* “adventures” as a launching point to generate new information to further enhance the topic covered. “*Good Night, and Pot Luck*” also exemplified how best a blog can be utilized for the sharing and storing of knowledge. Tags appropriately archived the parent-related topic for further retrieval and *bluebro* was able to keep the blog updated on his progress by posting new updates.

In the exit interviews, I wanted to gauge my perceptions of the development of CoP norms against that of the participants – who had no idea what constitutes a CoP. While the exchange of ideas and the development of implicit knowledge into practice was a measurable outcome, the formation of community proved more difficult to discern. In what was admittedly not the most efficient way to inquire about community building, I asked if members could “name any of their fellow posters off the top of their heads” and anything they learned about them. Each respondent provided a varied smattering of
names – but of the six regular posters, all mentioned bluebro (save bluebro himself, naturally). Even Amerigeek, who admitted being “terrible at names,” remembered bluebro. Excluding bluebro again, three of the five other regular posters also mentioned details of the “Good Night, and Pot Luck” saga. Some mentioned that they recalled bluebro’s success in getting two extra parents to attend the pot luck dinner. Sprichsprach added, “[the blog] was very useful to current members. It was an environment to not only share ideas/ask questions, but also to express frustrations and celebrate victories … a forum like this would have been a wonderful addition as a resource and sounding board during my year.” While these data are not necessarily indicative of the complete formation of an online CoP – for that, the study would require significantly more time – they do indicate short-term success and suggest the potential for further development exists. Such development, however, may be dependent upon the motivations of participants and their implications for sustainability.

Motivational Factors

Because many of the studies examining online CoPs warned that those communities with a complete absence of face-to-face interaction or scheduled group events largely faltered (Bettoni et al. 2007), I felt it was important for my study to pay particular attention to the motivations of the participants. Six of 11 participants posted regularly on the blog – at least four textual contributions (new posts or comments) per week. Examining their reported motivations for participation within the context of interviews and textual contributions may help determine the possibility for long-term
blog sustainability and full development into a community of practice. Similarly, examining that data provided by those who participated irregularly – or not at all – may further inform practical and theoretical implications.

**The Regulars**

Ethnography largely utilizes examination of the “regular” members of a community to determine the rules by which it is governed. Because the communicative acts over the four-week blog period displayed evidence of CoP norms, the motivations of those who consistently posted may provide insight on the participatory patterns that developed to produce an emerging CoP blog. All six regulars reported the AmeriCorps program itself and/or education – the “domain” – was among the driving motivators to both visit the blog and post regularly. Additionally, the three alumni regulars specifically mentioned “empathy” as part of that devotion which resulted in sharing implicit knowledge. Sprichsprach, whose contributions on the blog were typically lengthy, overwhelmingly positive and packed with anecdotal knowledge, said: “Much of my motivation stemmed from empathy towards other bloggers, especially those who were current members. AmeriCorps can be a lot to take on for anyone, and I remember feeling lost and alone even WITH a team to support me. I also felt that I had a lot of useful experiences/anecdotes that could be helpful to others.”

**Buckets,** keeping in tune with her tendency to analogize pop culture in communicative acts, illustrated the importance of the alumni sharing their anecdotal and implicit knowledge to improve the program: “It’s like when Yoda was dying and he told Luke to pass on what he had learned because Luke was the last of the Jedi. He didn’t say
‘make sure you take the kids to the Jedi Library and have them study up.’ He knew Luke’s experiences would be the best teacher, and that’s like what we did here.”

Amerigeek, who produced the most textual data of any participant, mentioned another motivation that stemmed from group membership and the responsibility of contributing: “I wanted to do my part to keep the momentum up and make sure the blog was functioning, because I really believe in this sort of thing and that it only works if people participate. I guess that falls under something like "civic duty" as a member of the group. And I just like sharing what I know and interacting with others.”

Although the three regular current members, bluebro, Jordan23 and river_run, cited immediate help with strategies and support as their primary motivators, all three also expressed desire or interest in returning to pass their respective knowledge onto new members as the alums had done for them. Jordan23 mentioned the knowledge gained by participating and wanting to be able to contribute in the future: “You would think there was nothing in it for them, the alums, but after you do AmeriCorps you realize that the new people are going to go through what you did, and so you want to give back. I’ve already gotten tons of good ideas in only a few weeks here and it’s because the former members actually care, so I want to be like that too. There’s no other way for new people to get info.”

**The Irregulars and No-Shows**

While the regular blog participants displayed consistent knowledge exchange throughout the study, it is important to analyze the motivations of the five participants...
who were not regular contributors. Two participants – *prospector* and *omega336* – posted less than four total times on the blog. While *prospector*, an alumna, logged on for the first time one week after the blog launched, she still observed the community norms of creating introductory posts. However, she all but disappeared from future discussions, save two comments on future threads. *Prospector* cited work and family obligations as reasons for her declining participation. *Omega336*, a current member, did not create an introductory post and as such, “never felt a part of the community.” *Omega336* insisted that she “wanted to participate, but needed more hours in the day and maybe an e-mail reminder because I’m very forgetful.” She also cited school activities and family visits as taking up all of her extra time. Interestingly, *Omega336* only named her “commitment to do so” as motivation for her three posted comments. She did not mention the same devotion to the “greater good” of the AmeriCorps program that regular posters did. While it appears that AmeriCorps members are generally very committed to the domain of service and education, that devotion is not unanimous.

Three study participants did not post during the four-week blog period. One initially responded to requests for an exit interview, but did not respond to follow-up inquiries. Entrance interviews for two of the three non-participants indicated they faced minimal communicative challenges during their services. Additionally, their service years occurred between five and eight years ago, suggesting proximity to service time may account for desire to stay involved with the program. The third participant was a current member serving in urban Baltimore and cited numerous communicative
challenges and seemed eager to seek solutions within the blog; as such, her reasons for not participating remain unclear.

**Technological Considerations**

Throughout the open blog period, members did not appear to meet technical or other difficulties with the physical posting of threads and comments. After the first week, I sent an e-mail reminding participants to contact me should they encounter any technical or logistical problem, or if they had a question about how to do something. The only response I received regarding technological issues was an unprompted note – two days after the blog launch – from Amerigeek reminding me to “turn on the tag cloud.” Posters had been able to tag their material, but the clickable cluster of keywords typically visible in the sidebar was nowhere to be found. Amerigeek mentioned she is an avid blogger and “geek,” thus I was not surprised she reminded me; however, considering the display of blogger norms from the rest of the group (prolific tagging, using tags already in existence if they applied, assigning appropriate categories, among others) it is likely that others noticed the early lack of tag cloud as well. One important element related to the “practice” CoP norm is the archived knowledge repository that can be easily accessed well after the information is shared. Members regularly tagged and categorized their posts, but did not seek to further organize their shared knowledge. Possible reasons for this are discussed in further chapters.
Conclusion

What began as eleven strangers and a researcher lumped together on an isolated plane of cyberspace ended as a group committed to interacting on an emergent community of practice blog. The decision to study the ways in which an online CoP may develop from its inception was littered with “unknowns”; despite the fact that the participants were all members of the AmeriCorps community, it was unclear how they would interact – or even if they would interact – and whether the community of practice norms that scripted to near-perfection in theory could translate to actual practice.

Ultimately, the participation level was higher than I ever expected and the ethnography gleaned as much data from the relatively short timeframe as possible. This research first sought to answer the question, “Can AmeriCorps members develop ‘community of practice’ norms while communicating on a support blog?” Communicative acts analyzed with accompanying contextual interview data suggest positive indicators of Serveblog.org’s CoP norm development. The “community” norm was least developed of the three, but did manifest throughout the study – particularly at the beginning and again during the final week. Although four weeks was not the ideal timeframe to fully cultivate roles and identities that define relationships within online communities, data indicated that members built enough trust to unhesitatingly impart both support-based and knowledge-based information. The leadership displayed by Amerigeek also proved to be an integral component of the community structure.

Members fully demonstrated the “practice” norm by supplying information to those who sought it; they did so by relaying anecdotal and other applicable experiences,
providing specific strategies and best practices, directing others to linked information, and sharing their implicit knowledge. Current members were able to demonstrate the transfer to tacit knowledge by applying what they learned from others to their prevailing service challenges – and reporting the results back to the blog.

The “domain” norm proved to be the most thoroughly developed of the three, as it also informed my second research question, “What motivates AmeriCorps members to participate (or not) on a support blog?” Regular blog contributors expressed and demonstrated empathy for current members and the desire to improve the quality of the AmeriCorps experience. These elements, particularly when combined and exemplified throughout the “Good Night, and Pot Luck” saga, suggest Serveblog.org can function as a prototype for startup CoP blogs that work to improve the experiences of AmeriCorps members.
Chapter 6: Discussion

The AmeriCorps members and alums that participated throughout the Serveblog.org’s four-week open period displayed marked development towards regular implementation of community of practice norms. The communicative events analyzed indicated devotion to the AmeriCorps education domain and regular contributions of implicit knowledge that, in many instances, created successful opportunities for transformation into immediate practice. Trust and other indicators of community development also emerged, but were not as evident as the preceding CoP norms, perhaps due to the relatively short period of time the blog operated. Serveblog.org, at least in the short-term, appears to have potential as a vehicle to connect members and share implicit knowledge and support. However, limitations do exist, and the study’s implications in both the academic and practical realms should be examined.

Methodological Contributions

The data analyzed in this study contribute a unique methodological perspective to the body of literature pertaining to blogs as CoPs and online CoPs in general. While research has explored established blogs as CoPs (Silva et al. 2004) and startup non-blog online CoPs (Moule 2004), this is the first study that built a blog, recruited members and watched its evolution for the specific purpose of examining the emergence of a community of practice.
The combination of entrance interviews, participant-observation ethnography and exit interviews promoted a synthesized investigation of developing norms. Open-ended questions asked during entrance interviews allowed blog participants to recount their service experiences, voice their ideas of training and preparation, and divulge expectations for a hypothetical support system. It provided me, as the researcher, with insight into the possible motivations for participation. The exit interviews allowed me to test my observational interpretations of emerging norms against the answers that users provided. Instead of making assumptions about meaning or motivation, those directly involved in the post were able to provide specific context and elaborate on norms-related issues.

As a member of the AmeriCorps community, I understood their perspectives more than that of a researcher less closely affiliated. While this has the potential to act as a limitation in some respects, ethnographic methods suggest my position as an insider allowed participants to behave more naturally than they would with an “outside” researcher. Non-ethnographical methods like those used in the MetaFilter (Silva et al. 2004) study examined data in a largely textually-focused manner without fully considering the context in which the participants live.

Because this study focused on the evolution of the blog community from its inception, those who wish to launch similar blogs in the future will have more insight into the requirements for initial success. Furthermore, should AmeriCorps or other organizations wish to launch CoP blogs, they will need to be informed on the
mechanisms by which they are built to succeed. Previous literature that explored both successful and failed online CoPs did so by retroactively examining data. Regardless of Serveblog.org’s ultimate outcome as both a blog and an online community of practice, my research sought the ability to document the blog’s evolution and discover exactly how the formation may (or may not) occur. Observing communicative acts unfold on the blog allowed for smaller research questions to form as more data emerged: How would Jordan23 fare in seeking an inexpensive foosball table on Craigslist, as advised by other members? What effect did Amerigeek’s post about “February Burnout Syndrome” have on river_run’s re-emergence on the blog? Would bluebro have considered “getting one or two extra parents to show up” a success before receiving encouragement from Sprichsprach? Real-time posting affects real-time CoP development; this study maintained that the concept is best explored not theoretically or retroactively, but synchronously.

Other Academic Implications

- **Theories of Cultural Communication**

The study’s data have implications for the theoretical constructs previously explored through speech codes (Philipsen 1992) literature. First, through both interactions among blog participants and their respective interviews, the cultural communicative context on which the study was built was reinforced. Although I did not specifically recruit members who had faced or are currently facing challenges in cross-cultural communication, the dialogue among participants suggested the context existed in
each of their respective placements. Alumni members’ responses to requests for advice and solutions tended to include the same theme: “getting in is hard.” This reinforces speech codes principles and suggests the AmeriCorps-centered context is uniquely suited for addressing these communicative issues.

The Serveblog.org speech community itself registered many “us vs. them,” “insider vs. outsider” tendencies towards the members’ service communities. The palpable distinction and the fact that they acknowledged the need to get “in” indicated that AmeriCorps members realize cultural communicative barriers exist, and that the education context within their service communities differs from the education context they may have experienced elsewhere. Considering the lack of cultural communication literature that specifically featured studies within the United States, this finding suggests that speech codes theory within American society in general is a topic under-researched; the AmeriCorps experience could provide significant data on this construct alone.

This study, however, did not seek to prove the existence of cultural speech communities within AmeriCorps service placements; instead, it justified my hypothesis that the cultural communicative context is one in which a separate support community for AmeriCorps members is needed. For example, Jordan23’s post seeking suggestions for suitable downtime / non-academic activities for inner-city teenagers garnered a more contextually viable solution in a community like Serveblog.org than that of a generic youth activities database. Fellow posters on the blog have experienced these circumstances and therefore understand and can consider the probable external challenges: few resources and supervision, little space in which to operate, lack of ability
to play outside, kids who are unexposed to mainstream American activities, kids who lack opportunities for physical exercise, or other factors typical to urban youth programs. Acknowledging this context exists, whether or not the blog participants know it as an academic theory, helps mediate some of their frustrations and produces ideas that have better chances for success.

- **Communities of Practice Constructs**

  The blog showed marked development according to the three CoP constructs: domain, community and practice (Wenger et al. 2002). Studies suggested that the more committed members are to the “domain,” the more motivated they would be to participate (Wasko & Faraj 2000). The results of the study found that those who posted regularly were especially committed to the education sector of AmeriCorps. Research (Moule 2004) also found that in general, online-only CoPs (distinct from online CoPs that operate in organizations that can still schedule face-to-face meetings, web conferencing, or other method in which members physically see one another while interacting) eventually falter because participants no longer feel the novelty of posting and lose motivation to visit the site without some type of special event or new material drawing them back to the community. The considerable commitment to the AmeriCorps domain that participants relayed through both their interviews and prolific posting likely accounts for the reason why only one day occurred during the open blog period with no activity. The most successful CoPs are said to be those in which the goals and needs of an organization intersect with the passions and aspirations of its participants (Wenger 2002). “Passion”
and “aspirations” seem especially prevalent to the AmeriCorps participants due to the intense nature of their service situations. As such, this study’s findings may be the ideal exemplification for “devotion to the domain”; however, the same unique devotion may also render the group incompatible with general organizations.

Another key finding in literature corroborated by Serveblog.org was the importance of finding common ground among members to enhance the connection (Wenger et al. 2002). When connections are discovered, more value can be placed in the interaction. Often, AmeriCorps members serve alone – several as discovered through the blog – and the feeling that another person finally understood exactly what no one else could before is a powerful motivator to seek that person’s input and value what they contribute. “Empathy” repeated as a constant theme throughout the exit interviews, indicating the recalling of the isolation and frustration associated with seeking solutions to seemingly unanswerable questions drove members to participate. Perhaps the intensity under which AmeriCorps members serve accounts for the subsequent ease that they develop CoP norms. People who commit to a year of national service in a largely thankless job, during which they receive a below-poverty “living allowance” are, at the very least, committed to their programs. As Buckets mentioned, “AmeriCorps is like taking AP Biology in high school. You want to challenge yourself, then you hate yourself and want to quit because it’s so hard and unforgiving, but you somehow work through it and are better because of it. And then you never regret it and think everyone should do it.”
As discussed in the ethnography, the “community” norm of the CoP did not have sufficient time to develop. *Amerigeek*, however, did emerge as a leader in the community, both in providing solutions and generating new topics. Studies show that leadership or moderation is essential for cultivating successful communities (Restler & Woolis 2007, Moule 2004). Exit interviews indicated that some posters expected more “quality posts” from certain participants; this suggests community members were already being judged on “good” or “bad” posts – similar to findings in the Metafilter study (Silva et al. 2004). Should this study ever be expanded, the period of blog interaction would best occur over a full AmeriCorps term. Many programs run yearly from August to August – and so too should the study, in order to fully chronicle the development of the community. Much of the CoP literature emphasized the value of anecdotal knowledge contribution (Leonard & Sensiper 1998, Chiu et al. 2006) to building a successful community. Serveblog.org members offered both details of service experiences and specific strategies to address concerns of current members. This study’s findings that its current members were more motivated and excited to visit the blog because of the helpful knowledge shared by former members is similar to previous research.

**Practical Implications**

The development of CoP norms among AmeriCorps members online has implications for practical application, both in the AmeriCorps realm and possibly in other organizations. The assembled current and previous AmeriCorps members shared knowledge and support that would otherwise not have been obtained due to the lack of
training and general information sharing among the network. The direct application of knowledge gained from the community into the service field reflected the successful transfer of anecdotal strategies and implicit knowledge to tacit, practical use.

The blog demonstrated its effectiveness as a vehicle for sharing and distributing information and support, but, as noted above, required more time to develop an efficient archival system for both the organization of data and ease of its future retrieval. Because it was a “closed” study, participants were not able to utilize RSS, implementation into del.icio.us, and other organizational tools that would have connected the blog within users’ sphere of online identity. Omega336’s wish that she “got an e-mail reminder” about visiting the blog may have been averted with implementation of RSS on a larger scale. More time would have also allowed for the full construction of the archived knowledge repository, and what Restler & Woolis (2007) termed “knowledge recycling.” The “practice” norm flourished throughout the blog period, but the study expired before Buckets could return to her early idea of organizing all of the shared knowledge “in a better way.” While tags remain the easiest way to classify posts – as demonstrated by the participants – it is probably not the most efficient manner of future retrieval. This is contrary to what Web 2.0 proponents (O’Reilly 2005) have lauded about blogs; however, finding does not render tags useless for Serveblog.org purposes. Tags can still act as keywords to quickly classify posts, while larger categories and perhaps permanent pages (such as the User Guide page) can be used to organize specific knowledge and strategies.

The success of Serveblog.org as a tool for AmeriCorps members exemplifies appropriate application of Web 2.0 instruments. Internet use is continuously growing
more ubiquitous with daily life. As more consumers look online to find information, traditional objective print journalism is being replaced by self-editing and selection of niche “news” that often derives from specific viewpoints. While the evolution of news and information consumption is its own complicated sector, the popularity of the Internet as the premiere information distribution tool affects realms outside of news and politics. Many organizations have tried to exact social presence by implementing Facebook-like platforms on their site. However, not all media consumers want, and many do not have time to visit numerous social media platforms throughout their daily routines. This is evidenced by the emergence of del.ic.ious, RSS feeds, and programs such as TweetDeck that syndicate all of a user’s social networking information into one place.

Every organization needs a website – but not every organization needs a blog. Every organization needs a method for interacting with its consumers – but not every organization needs a Facebook-like platform. Social networking tools are more popular than ever and can be dynamic additions to organizations, but their practical usage should be tailored appropriately.

Serveblog.org found success as a Web 2.0 solution because it carried specific functions and goals beyond “everyone else is doing it.” Several of my courses throughout graduate school have utilized class blogs and wikis, and many of them sat relatively untouched; research suggests there is less incentive for those groups with regular face-to-face interaction to also utilize online interaction (Moule 2004). Conversely, AmeriCorps members stationed across the country relied on the Web to function as their only connective mechanism. There existed a collective, driving
motivation among the members to either contribute knowledge and support, gain knowledge and support, or both – and the blog provided that vehicle. There also existed practical returns – current members who sought information applied it successfully and former members who provided information saw their advice and anecdotes improve the program; thus, motivation to keep returning grew. Additionally, organizations that seek to launch CoP blogs must consider how devoted their members are to the goals of their specific domain. Without such devotion to domain, the blog will likely not meet the same successes as those observed in this study.

**AmeriCorps-Specific Application**

Should this study be used to further develop CoP blogs as tools for AmeriCorps, its adaptation and implementation would likely need a more gradational approach. Considering both the data from this study and the general Web 2.0 communicative climate, success would likely require the following:

1. **Interest/Demand.**

   There appeared to be a significant amount of interest in a blog for those serving in the *education field*, but this study did not explore whether those who serve in other sectors also face such communicative and other challenges. It would be detrimental to the project to construct a blog that sat unused; a method for gauging interest/demand is explained further within the forthcoming plan.

2. **Visibility.**
The age-old saying wonders, “if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” In the Web 2.0 era one might ask, “if a website is built but no one links to it through social networking, does it really exist?” In order to truly harness the collective wisdom of AmeriCorps members and be available as a resource, the blog must be visible in search engines, on Technorati, on every blogroll possible, through Facebook widgets, and any other vehicle that acts as both linkage and promotion. When applicants are accepted to AmeriCorps, they should be able to Google “AmeriCorps blog” and locate this at the top of the results.


Although Serveblog.org would probably have been successful even with self-moderation, I tend to agree with previous studies that indicate a moderator is essential for maintaining focus and order within an online CoP. If there existed some way to restrict access of AmeriCorps support blogs to members and alums – such as login with an AmeriCorps e-mail address – the need for moderation may slightly decrease. But as of now, no such safeguard exists, thus the blog would need to remain completely “open” to allow total access. Open access increases the potential for trolling, spamming, and other malicious behavior best handled by a moderator.

The implementation of this study on a larger scale would actually require it to start smaller. It would no longer carry the banner of “academic study,” and therefore
would need to establish credibility within the AmeriCorps community at large. I explain these points further in plan outlined in Appendix 8.1.

Limitations

Although the pilot blog displayed positive indicators for the development of an online community of practice, the study carried some inherent limitations. The most pressing limitation was one discussed by much of the online CoP and online ethnography literature in general: the validity of Internet data. The nature of the study required the data collection to take place entirely online; as such, I had no way of verifying the authenticity of the participants as what they reported. Despite not being able to prove identities or data reported, there exists less skepticism on the researcher’s part due to both the method of recruitment and the prolific and personal blog posts. By recruiting directly from AmeriCorps social networking sites, the chances of attracting deceptive participants is less likely than if recruitment was opened to the Internet community at large. Also, the amount of time regular participants spent reading, posting and responding – coupled with their largely strong motivation to participate – indicates a true interest in the education domain of AmeriCorps that likely would not be present if participants were not actually connected to the program. While these factors suggest the data validity was likely not compromised, it should be noted that the authenticity could never be proven; should this study be expanded in the future, the researcher may choose to travel for face-to-face interviews or utilize web conferencing technology.
There also exists an assumption in today’s mediascape and wireless culture that Internet users have universal access throughout the entire day. As was discovered through exit interviews, at least one of the participants could not access Servelblog.org from her work site. I neglected to consider that despite all participants being regular Internet users, there may have been other factors preventing participants from accessing the site. *Omega336* did not specify whether the access denial was due to the school’s blocking software or because of a technological glitch; either way, I would have suggested alternatives should she have informed me earlier. The fault, however, still remains with the researcher for not inquiring.

Online ethnography, as previously discussed, poses inherent limitations. There exists a possibility for generalizing within findings. Additionally, my position as an insider to the AmeriCorps community carried the possibility for data analysis colored by emotional ties to the subject matter. Qualitative research methods naturally pose a subjective danger; I attempted to avoid the use of presuppositions and assumptions by conducting open-ended interviews that sought contextual and motivational details. Additionally, blogs – by definition – are supposed to be interconnective agents. Because this methodology required a controlled group of participants, they were not free to promote, recruit and utilize some popular blogging features such as trackbacks and pings. Opening the study to the AmeriCorps community at large, rather than a controlled group, may have yielded different results.

Lastly, the methodological limitation that I believe could most impact this study is the relatively short period of time participants interacted on the blog. Originally, I had
proposed the blog should operate at least 10-12 weeks in order to allow the potential for more development and more opportunity for current members to take what they learned and apply it within their service placements; however, the thesis timeframe did not allow for a lengthier study. While measurable development did occur during the four-week period, data collection concluded before participants were able to archive their accumulated collective knowledge in a more streamlined manner – something they had explicitly mentioned as wanting to revisit when enough strategies had been shared. A lengthier study may also have revealed more accurate patterns of participation. Silva et al.’s (2004) MetaFilter study tracked members who joined and left, as well as those who joined and remained active in the blog; a lengthier study may have seen those who posted regularly during the four-week period at Serveblog.org decrease their participation. That, in turn, would have produced more informed data and provided a more accurate representation of blogs operating as CoPs and their feasibility as a practical tools for AmeriCorps.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Alongside the challenges AmeriCorps members expect to encounter while working in their service communities is an unforeseen adversary: time. It slows to a crawl as members realize that respect is currency in the communication process – and is only earned by those who maintain continuity over months and years. It inevitably speeds to a blistering pace once that critical foundation is finally established, leaving members wishing they had another year to make a better impact within their service communities. Time between acceptance and placement is too short a window to allow for full integration or orientation to a service site – and so the cycle repeats itself as the next member commits to the position for the following year.

That incoming member should be able to not only assume the previous member’s duties, but also absorb all of the knowledge necessary to establishing a position within the community that will promote faster integration. However, both lack of resources and the large scope of the AmeriCorps program almost guarantee that members will never enter service standardized as all-knowing and fully-trained. But just as members supplement the needs of non-profits and other organizations to help those in poverty, they can supplement the needs of AmeriCorps to help themselves; the constructs that embody the community of practice concept seem suited for this purpose. Simply testing its merits in theory, though, would not have satisfied my investigation. In order to fully explore the capability of AmeriCorps members to develop an online community of practice, I built a blog and chronicled its evolution.
There may exist a certain temptation in modern solution-hunting to think “Internet first.” In this case, I initially resisted, and considered research that would involve face-to-face apprenticeship, or “shadowing,” that focused on the passing of local speech codes information from the current member to the incoming member. But these thoughts gained little traction, and I turned to the Web and began constructing the study as it is now. However, my initial desire to devise a program akin to student teaching was not fully unsound. A master teacher essentially passes implicit knowledge and anecdotal experiences to her student teacher. Serveblog.org evolved into an accessible community of master teachers and student teachers. The concepts remain the same, but the delivery and adaptation to the modern Web era exemplifies the true potential for blogs as learning tools.

This study was devised and executed within the AmeriCorps context, and its data were primarily examined through that practical lens. But these findings may contribute to any organization seeking to harness the totality of a blog’s capability to serve as a support community and knowledge repository. This study found that online CoPs develop with the guidance of a discernable leader. It found that the cyclical nature of participation uses empathy and collective devotion to the domain as driving motivators. Most importantly, it found that support blogs functioning as communities of practice can become the connective tools that allow those with experience to share it, those without knowledge to gain it, and those who participate to better the chances of current and future members to meet their goals.
Chapter 8: Appendix

8.1: AmeriCorps Community Blog Network Plan

1. Re-introduce Serveblog.org as a more generic support blog.
   - Begin collecting AmeriCorps personal blog links to add to blogroll
   - Use content section to post AmeriCorps news, features, and editorials on topics both broad and sector-specific
   - Allow for member registration and profile-making
   - Relocate old Serveblog.org data to a permanent page that links to “education.serveblog.org” – the old blog is now the education sector-specific blog connected to what will become the Serveblog.org “Hub”
   - Develop other permanent pages that include: “About Serveblog.org,” “Cities Guide,” and “Links”

The strategy of “going small before going large” will allow the network to develop with more fidelity. The old education domain blog will still exist, but will be placed as a permanent page within what will develop into the Serveblog.org Hub. When that blog builds a following as a general AmeriCorps resource, it will earn a reputation as a place to interact and seek information. At the same time, the education sector blog will remain open for interaction and seek to both add members and exemplify the potential for other sectors to develop blogs. Should there be interest in developing other sector-specific CoP blogs, they will be created and added across the top permanent page section (see step 4’s screen capture). Instructions for how to request blog development will be available through the “About Serveblog.org” page.

The “Cities Guide” is an additional resource I think should be included in the developing hub. Some strategies shared within the blog have less to do with serving the assigned population and more to do with surviving in a strange new city. Where can members find apartments on a stipend budget? What are the best modes of transportation for reaching your service site? Is there anything to do around here on weekends that relieves the stress accumulated during the week? The same anecdotal knowledge that accumulates to help members serve better can also accumulate on a city-specific page to help members live better. I would start an example page for Washington, DC, and allow registered users to contribute information for their respective placement cities.

2. Establish Serveblog.org’s presence within social networking sites and blog search engines.
- Create Facebook application and distribute among AmeriCorps groups
- Register at Technorati and implement Google search terms within code
- Leave comments on linked AmeriCorps blogs explaining the site and linking back
- Enact Search Engine Optimization and best practices for visibility

The implementation of Serveblog within social networks already frequented by the AmeriCorps population is an important second step. As mentioned above, visibility is one of the requirements for not only surviving, but thriving in the world of Web 2.0. It should be made apparent to tech-savvy members that participation on the blog can be implemented into their existing social networks and does not seek to replace them or separate them from the sites they frequent daily.

3. **Continue development of sector-specific CoP blogs.**

Although my study began with developing a sector-specific community blog, the development of a network would likely see this as one of the latter steps. Having a successful education sector blog will help illustrate the value of knowledge exchange.

4. **Gradually implement evolving features; Serveblog.org becomes the “Main Hub”**

Serveblog.org hub functions:

- Main links to all sector-specific blogs
- Permanent pages for city-specific information
- Links to personal AmeriCorps blogs
- Updated content would feature announcements, AmeriCorps news, or other info and would feed into sector-specific blogs
- Acts as recruitment focus before distributing members to areas
As the “main hub,” Serveblog.org would act as the central contact and recruitment point for members seeking information and seeking to contribute information. The permanent page links across the top separate various AmeriCorps sectors (in this example, environment, health, education, disaster relief, and housing/development are used). Connecting all of the sector-specific blogs, as well as personal AmeriCorps blogs, promotes the greatest potential for both community-building and knowledge exchange. Should the network evolve as such, it may act as an online CoP that houses smaller online CoPs.
8.2 Blog Participant Information & Example Screenshots

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<th>STATUS</th>
<th># POSTS STARTED</th>
<th># COMMENTS</th>
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<td>Alum</td>
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Seeking downtime activities (the well is dry)

Ok, everyone. It’s time to address the other most difficult question in life besides the meaning of the universe. I’m desperately seeking some decent downtime activities for 12-15 year olds. Right now their favorites are fighting (and me breaking it up) and getting around our blocking software to their Myspace pages (so).

We have a lot of options, but I feel like they can only go so far. Computer literacy games, computer reading games, learn-to-type software... puzzles, books, board games... we have all of this, and they do use them a lot. But sometimes they want to blow off steam (they’re adolescents after all) and I can’t let them get all crazy inside. We are located in a very urban area, and don’t have too much of a “yard” to speak of, and also it’s way too cold to be running around outside.

Is there anything you used or know of that you can suggest? I may even have a bit of money to spend from our activities budget. It doesn’t necessarily have to be “academic” (in fact, maybe better if it isn’t). Just activities that are safe and constructive for that age.

Impossible, right?

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Posting: Activities
Tags: Activities - games - improvements - post:Jordan23 - strategies - teenagers

Here we go... I’d like your feedback on a book idea...
Strategy All-Call... Parents!
Feb 14th, 2009 by Jordan23 (63)

I promise by the end of these few weeks I will have contributed something helpful to someone, but here I am again, asking for YOUR help.

Another issue I've been having late is dealing with parents/guardians/whoever fills that role. In a previous life I knew how to talk to adults on the phone, conference with them about things concerning my interactions with their children, what they can do to help, etc. Nothing that's a huge deal, but basic teacher-parent things.

Sometimes I'll need to contact them because of permission for field trips, or because of behavior issues and that type of things. Sometimes I just want to tell a parent that their kid did something great. But here, I can't even REACH a parent on the phone, let alone speak with them on it. They don't answer because they think it's a crick or some other person of authority. Sometimes the lines are constantly busy or disconnected completely.

When I ask the kids about how to get in touch, I usually am given some line about them not getting into their "mother"'s business (and neither should I). Then there are all the rumors flying around about who's the crack addict and who's got 14 people living in a 2 room apartment... rumors that I never would have believed four months ago but now I do. Long story short, it all contributes to my frustration for not being able to establish some kind of contact with the people raising these kids. I think it would help them, it would help me... it would just help.

Anyway, sorry for the really rambling post, but does anyone have suggestions? Anything you alums did? Or is this totally out of my control? Is it normal?

Posted in: Un categorized.
Tagged: all-call, community, elementary-age, help, parents, post: bluebro, strategies...
9 Comments

Jordan23
February 17, 2009 at 4:59 pm (Edit)

blush,

Again, we seem to be working in similar scenarios. I deal with this at least once a week. But I’ve really come to believe that it’s out of my hands (at least because I don’t have a better strategy). You can only control what you can control. I went back to your intro post and stop me if I’m making an incorrect assumption — but you don’t have a teaching background? One of the things I learned in my education training was although the ideal situation will have the parents working in tandem with your goals (like helping with homework, being aware of activities, etc.) doesn’t happen as often as you’d like. And in the low-income settings, you often have parents working 2 or 3 jobs, taking care of extended families, priorities that are more immediate than what one of their children is doing at school/after school. You might as well go in with the assumption that parents won’t be of help — period. That way sound cynical, but it’ll help your thinking/strategizing to have that defense in place. You just have to make sure that the time you are working with the kids is the best you can do. That’s what you can control.

AmeriGeek
February 17, 2009 at 7:18 pm (Edit)

This was one of biggest program-related gripes in my last year of service. Our homework club was literally next door to our kids’ homes (we operated out of a decommissioned in the housing complex, and one of our kids actually lived in the next apt over). And you, even being away no more than a few blocks at most from everyone our group served, we got about 2-3 parent volunteers the entire year, and these were occasional. And this was with the Housing Admin office making volunteering with us count as community service points (if you weren’t paying rent, you had to do X hours of community service).

Seriously, if you could do it to get the families involved, we did - we had community hot dog cookouts (free food), walk-arounds to talk to parents, letters in backpacks, calls... the works. Nada. It wasn’t just a matter of work or (clearly) transportation. Many of the families didn’t work.

What we ended up realizing is that whether they worked (legitimate reason not to volunteer) or not, many of the parents viewed our homework club as a free daycare they could get

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Working with regular staff
Feb 17th, 2009 by Buckets. [Edit]

It’s been a few years since my term, but I was trying to think of something that happened to me then that maybe other people have experienced too. And the discussion of parents down below reminded me of this.

Did anyone else have trouble integrating with the regular staff of the places you worked, for whatever reason? For me, it was hard to work with the parents of kids because the attitudes of the few staff members about the parents were already projected on me. It’s like I wasn’t allowed to come to my own conclusions about things, and that made the work more difficult because I had to remind myself that I only heard one side of a story.

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*Unpleasant realities like...*
bluebro
March 2, 2009 at 3:08 pm (Edit)

I feel like I just got my second wind. Maybe it’s a little bit of confidence from knocking on doors, I don’t know what. But I definitely had that feeling about a month ago — like I was dreading the rest of the year. So it’s not just you. I feel a bit better right now, but at least in my experience, being an AmeriCorps member is slightly bi-polar :p

Amerigeek
March 2, 2009 at 9:29 pm (Edit)

Happened to me during "both" years, and a few others in my programs.

Of course, for the first year in a Habitat for Humanity program, that I was mostly spent slugging through ice-cold and glue-like mud construction sites, putting on roof sheathing in freezing mist and dealing with a round of Biblical Weather (TM) in which we got thunder and lightning thing during a snowstorm, when the temperature leaves and then hail followed by popcorn snow, and then it warmed up to 60 degrees in about half an hour and made fog, all in one morning. (The program leader made the decision to send us all home at lunch out of sheer terror; LOL.)

I think it’s mostly about having been off a few weeks over the winter holidays and having gotten to the point where your situation is routine instead of novel or filled with orientation/training, etc — you’ve got vacation brain and instead of being out having fun, it’s the second straight month of uninterrupted slog. And from where you’re sitting, program graduation date looks like it’s far, far away.

Amerigeek
March 2, 2009 at 9:31 pm (Edit)

Dang, sorry for the massive link fail. That goes to a nice pic of popcorn snow. Danielle, can you clean that up for me? As far as I can tell, we don’t have content editing privileges.

sprichsprach
March 2, 2009 at 9:35 pm (Edit)

IT IS NOT JUST YOU. 😊

We should make up a word for this. It happens...I will go out on a limb and say it happens to...
Dear AmeriCorps member,

I am an AmeriCorps alum currently preparing to write my Masters thesis at Georgetown University. I am researching cross-cultural communication as relating to national service volunteers. Due to its scope, AmeriCorps lacks the kind of universal cross-cultural training necessary to fully prepare members to reach their fullest potential. Often times, members are serving alone in a community with a vastly different culture than their own. If those members could be connected online, perhaps idea-sharing would create a knowledge base that would act as both a support system and a training mechanism. In this light, I want to create a pilot community blog on which current members and alumni can share best practices for a more successful service year.

Currently, I am seeking volunteers for this study. If you are a member who is serving (or has served) in the “education wing” of AmeriCorps (teaching, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, etc.) and want to participate, please e-mail me at the following address and I will contact you with more details.

Thank you,

Danielle Thomas
det7@georgetown.edu
8.4: Skeleton Interview Questions (General Themes)

Spradley (1979) Ethnographic Interview Constructs

**Grand Tour Questions**

These are questions that lay out an in-depth descriptive sequence explaining a series of events, describing a group of people, telling how to engage in activity, use an object or run through a sequence of events that occurred during a particular time period.

*Typical Grand Tour Questions* – These ask for a description of how things usually are and ask informants to generalize and talk about a pattern of events: “Can you describe a typical day in your Shaping A Life class?”

*Specific Grand Tour Questions* – These ask for a description of a recent day or the most recent series of events: “Can you describe what happened during your last Shaping A Life class?”

**Experience Questions**

These questions ask for particular experiences people have had while in a particular setting. The problem is that they can be so general that they are hard to answer. They tend to elicit unusual experiences, rather than typical ones.

**Example Questions**

These questions are used for focusing an informant on a specific case. They take a particular story or example previously identified by the informant in the interview and ask her for a specific example of what she means.

**Pre-Blog Thematic Skeleton**

During what timeframe and in what city did you serve?

Can you describe the community in which you served?

Can you describe a typical day at work?

What was your experience in the education field prior to serving -- both in terms of training and practice?
Can you describe your pre-AmeriCorps experience (if any) working within a community of diverse and/or low socioeconomic population?

Can you describe some specific challenges faced during your service?

Where did you seek solutions to your challenges?

**Post-Blog Thematic Skeleton**

About how often did you visit the blog?

Can you describe your typical routine when visiting?

What motivated you to visit the blog?

How did you feel when someone responded to one of your posts?

Off the top of your head, can you name any of your fellow posters and something you learned about them?

Do you think you took on any certain role? Did anyone else?

How comfortable were you asking for help/advice? Giving help/advice?

Did you ever hesitate or censor yourself from posting anything?

Can you describe your reasoning in replying to other people’s posts?

Did anyone benefit from using the blog?
8.5 Informed Consent Document

Dear AmeriCorps Member/Alum,

I am an AmeriCorps alum who is preparing to write my Masters thesis at Georgetown University. I am researching cross-cultural communication and online support blogs as relating to national service volunteers.

You are invited to take part in a study designed to explore how online knowledge-sharing affects communication within AmeriCorps service communities. Your involvement includes three phases: an entrance interview, 4-5 weeks of participation on a blog, and an exit interview.

The entrance interview will examine your experiences communicating within your national service community and the challenges you encountered. The community blog will be made up of current members and alumni and serve as a place where all can share ideas and strategies to create a working support and knowledge base. You may post as little or as much on the blog as you wish. The exit interview will explore your experience using the community blog and how it may be used as a future tool for knowledge-sharing.

All personal information will be kept confidential. Emails containing interviews will be stored in a password-protected folder on the investigator’s computer. Emails will be deleted after the study’s conclusion. Any other information or records will be stored in a key-locked file cabinet. Participants will only use “screen names” in blog posts and will not know the identities of their fellow posters. The blog will only be accessible by the investigator and participants. Pseudonyms will be used in the written report. Any information collected will be deleted following completion of this research.

You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or risk. This study will provide benefits in terms of assessing new ways to improve national service.

My contact information, along with that of the Georgetown University Institutional Review Board that oversees research involving human subjects, is below. You may call or e-mail at any time should you have questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Danielle Thomas
Masters Candidate, Georgetown University

Please type an “X” indicating your consent or refusal to participate in the study.

____ I agree to participate in the above study.

___________________________________ (type name)
I do not agree to participate in the above study.

____________________________________ (type name)

Date _____________________________________
Danielle Thomas
Masters Candidate, Georgetown University
3520 Prospect St. NW Suite 311
Washington, DC  20057
Phone (513) 225-3535
Email: det7@georgetown.edu

Institutional Review Board
Georgetown University
SW104 Med-Dent Building
3900 Reservoir Rd, NW
Washington, DC  20057
Phone: (202) 687-1506
Email: irboard@georgetown.edu
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