

Learning Together: Exploring Possibilities for Online Communities

T410C
Spring I 2020

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Tuesday 1:00 – 4:00
Longfellow 320.

Fill out this survey to indicate your interest in the course:

<http://bit.ly/t410c-signup>.

How can online communities support the way we learn? In both formal and informal settings, young people are constantly using technology to connect to others about their interests, but these online spaces can often feel foreign to the adults who support their learning in offline spaces. Through MOOCs and online professional development, adults are also being asked to participate in online learning communities. This module is built around a month-long immersion into an online community of your choice (e.g., Scratch, a MOOC forum, Fanfiction.net, Fortnite, Minecraft, or a subreddit) as you consider how online communities are formed, what people can learn from them, and how we as educators can support learners in connecting their offline and online learning experiences. The goals of this course are to (1) develop an understanding of literature related to online communities and learning communities; (2) explore digital ethnographic methods, as connected to particular online communities; and (3) consider how to support learning in online communities.

Overview

Class sessions are three hours long and will run over the coming six weeks. Each session will be typically organized into three 50-minute blocks, with two 10-minute breaks in between. These sessions will involve: making progress on course projects, discussions and activities connected to the readings, as well as practice connected to key aspects of the research process.

To participate, you need to register for this module and be in attendance at the first session of the module. Auditors are welcome, with permission.

Office hours are by appointment. To request time to meet, or if you have any other questions, you can contact me at haduong@g.harvard.edu.

Expectations

A few words on what I expect of you and what you might expect of me, as we work together over the next few weeks to build a learning community.¹

What do I expect of you?

Attendance/Participation

I look forward to seeing you promptly in class. If you are unable to come to class (due to illness, unavoidable travel, etc.), please send me an email in advance of the session, or as soon as possible.

¹Adapted from Karen Brennan's T550 syllabus.

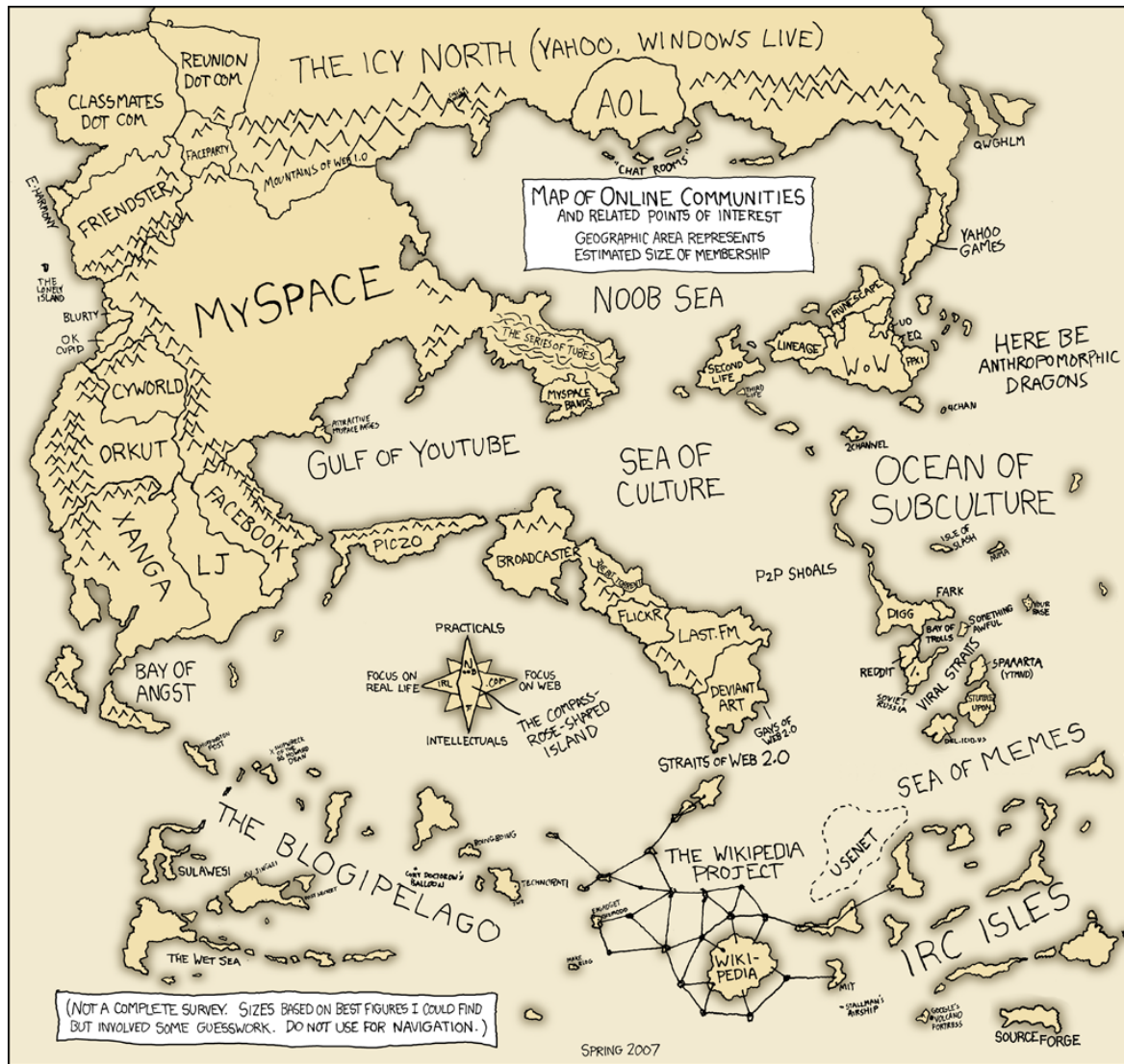


Figure 1: XKCD, 2007.

If you are unavailable to come to class, I will ask you to submit supplementary writing related to the week's theme and course activities.

Please be aware of your contributions in relation to others. Enthusiastic participation is wonderful, but some people may need more time to process ideas, or may take longer to speak up in group settings. As such, I strongly believe in speak up, step back: throughout our time together, check in with yourself to consider, "How much have I contributed? Are there others we haven't heard from?" At the same time, if you (like me) are quieter or prefer to speak later, challenge yourself to step up and share your ideas with others.

Every student in this classroom, regardless of personal history or identity categories, is a valued member of this group. Your experiences are valuable and important, and you should feel free to share them as they become relevant to our class. No student in this class is ever expected or believed to speak for all members of a group.

In this classroom, you have the right to determine your own identity. You have the right to be called by whatever name you wish, and for that name to be pronounced correctly. You have the right to be referred to by whatever pronouns you wish. You have the right to adjust those things

at any point in your education.

If you find that there are aspects of the course instruction, subject matter, or classroom environment that result in barriers to your inclusion, please contact me privately without fear of retaliation.

Credit/Attribution

Please be aware of appropriate credit and attribution in your work. I encourage you to complete the following tutorials: Principles of Paraphrasing and APA Exposed at <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/32423>. If you're considering intentionally plagiarizing, don't do it! I would much rather have a conversation about an extension than about academic misconduct. For reference, the [HGSE policy on academic integrity can be found here](#). You are also strongly encouraged to make use of the resources at the [Gutman Library Writing Services](#), including individual consultations to support writing assignments.

Communication

I encourage you to communicate early and often with me about how things are going, particularly if you have need of extensions on deadlines or questions about the reading material or your final project. In particular, if you need any additional accommodations, please contact Maritza Hernandez (maritza_hernandez@gse.harvard.edu) in the Office of Student Affairs.

I also encourage you to schedule office hours! I'm available to meet by appointment. Office hours are a chance for you to get help with your project; go over material covered in class; talk about connections between course material and your other work; or just share what's on your mind. They are generally student-directed, but I can help you formulate questions for us to discuss. I look forward to learning more about your interests!

What can you expect of me?

You can expect that I will strive to curate meaningful learning opportunities for and with you, give honest feedback when asked, be curious about your interests, be excited to learn with you when I don't know the answer, and be available to meet with you, as you need or want.

In the words of Seymour Papert, I believe learning is (and should be) "hard fun." This may involve challenges and stressful moments, which are okay! If you are feeling panicked, please consider reaching out—I am always happy to meet.

That said, it is my preference not to lecture in class—three hours of class-time may seem long, but time together is a precious resource, and I want to create as many opportunities as possible for you to learn with and from others, so you can expect that class-time will involve a lot of active participation. This is also my first time teaching this module, so feedback and ideas about how to shape the course as we go on are highly welcome. Please don't hesitate to let me know if there are additional readings you're excited about, or activities you liked/didn't like in class.

Assessment

I dislike grades. They can create an extra layer of unnecessary stress, as well as uphold power dynamics between teacher and student which I would prefer to remove. I strongly encourage you to take the course SAT/NCR (Satisfactory/No Credit), as a way to create space for you to challenge yourself and take risks. That said, I recognize that some students would prefer to take the course for a letter grade, and you may choose to do that instead. Either way, you begin the course with a SAT, or an A.

If you are sincerely investing in the course, through participating in class activities, responding to the readings, and working on your final project, etc., this will not change. Throughout the course, you will get written feedback from your peers, yourself (through reflective memos), as well as me. The purpose of this feedback is to spark your thinking and suggest new connections—hopefully supporting you in engaging more fully with the course material.

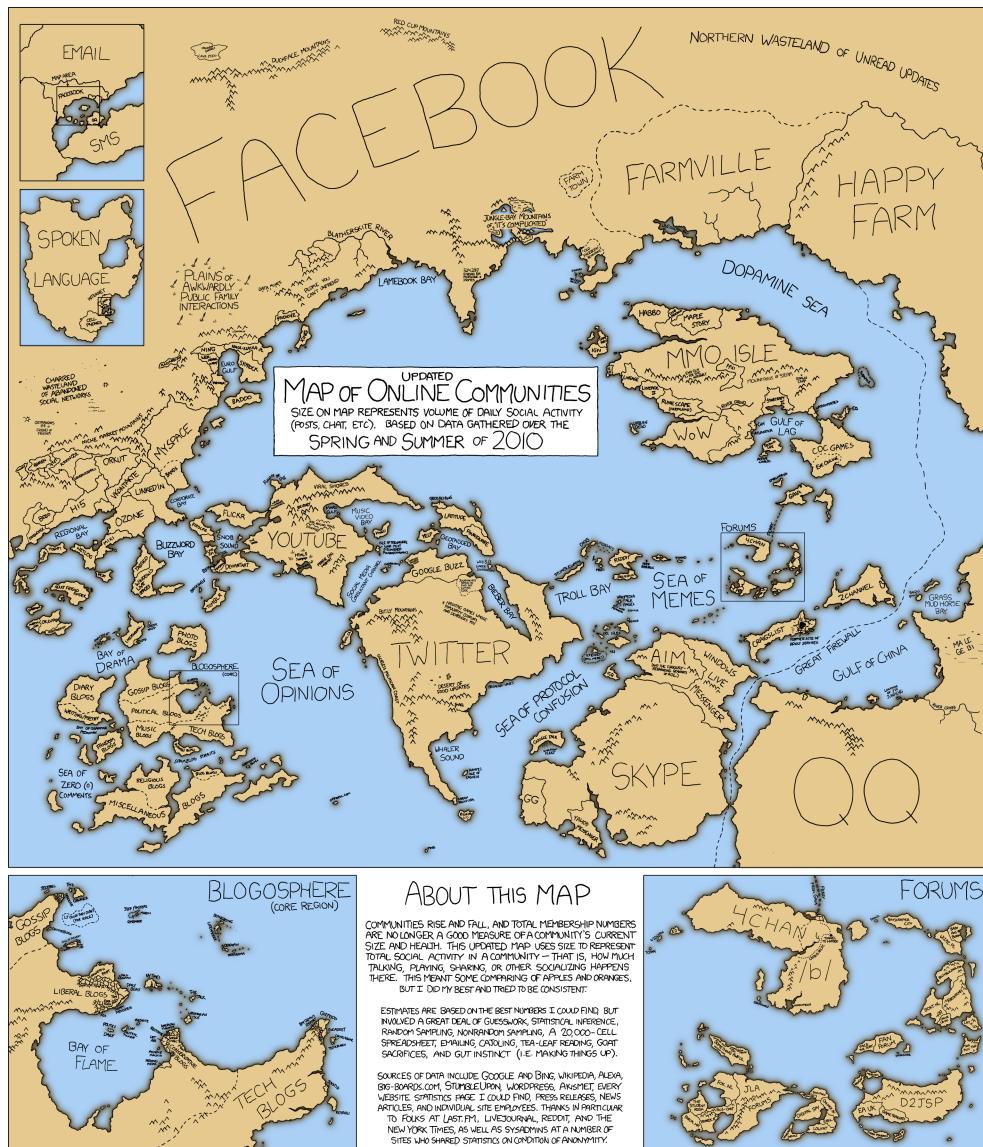


Figure 2: XKCD, 2010.

Assignments

Final project

The final project will be a self-directed, four-week long project. Either individually or with a partner, you will develop a project along one of these three lines: you can act as a participant-observer in an online community of your choice (e.g., a MOOC, such as CS50, or an interest-based community, such as Ravelry, Fortnite, or Scratch), collecting field notes, reflections, and memos of your experience, considering what you might learn about learning from exploring this community; you may design a hypothetical online community, considering how to support learning, develop

community norms, as well as ways to support online facilitators; or you may develop a research proposal/IRB application to act as a participant-observer in an online learning community.

If none of these options sound appealing, let's talk! I want this project experience to be useful, meaningful, and productive for your growth.

At the end of the module, I will ask you to submit a project portfolio, which will consist of a 750-word reflective memo and associated project artifacts (e.g., field notes, mockups, memos), as well as to do a 7 minute presentation. Throughout the module weeks, there will be multiple small assignments leading up to the final presentation, and more investment in those shorter assignments should lead to a final product that feels manageable with your other course work.

Weekly readings

These are some readings that I am deeply excited about reading together and discussing in class, and I hope that you find these as useful as I have. Read as much and as deeply as you can. You may disagree with some things and you might agree with other things, and that's okay! Bring those questions and thoughts into class, and we'll investigate together.

Weekly reflections and feedback

No tool has been as central to my own learning and growth as the design journal, first introduced to me when I was a T550 student. You will maintain a (semi-) public design journal (via Google Slides) that is accessible to other class members, both to read and comment on (more information in the first week, on Canvas). All of your work throughout the course should be shared here.

Each week, you will prepare a reflective response that addresses some aspects of the final project, as well as the readings. Each response is expected to be at least 500 words (or the equivalent in another medium/format). After submitting your response, I ask that you read at least one other classmate's journal and post a comment. Weekly, I will also be reading your work and responding via Google Slides comments.

Session One: Learning communities

January 28

- + How do we define community?
- + What does it mean to be online, together?

Before class

Making

- Create your online design journal.
- Write a 500 word reflection about the communities that support your learning.

Reading

- Barney, D. (2004). The Vanishing Table, Or Community in a World That Is No World.
- Barlow, J.P. (1996). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace
- Bernstein, J. (2019). Alienated, Alone And Angry: What The Digital Revolution Really Did To Us

Reflecting

- Post your reflection in your design journal
- From the readings, choose two quotes and two questions related to each quote. Post these in your design journal.

During class

Part One

- Introductions
- Course overview

Part Two

- Community guidelines observations

Part Three

- Community manifesto making

Why these readings?

Even before the world wide web came into existence, claims were made about what might be possible through technology. Because these readings come from different decades and represent different understandings of what technology might offer us, particularly in terms of community, they present an interesting backdrop to how we might, as a class, form our own community and consider what online communities we are interested in understanding.

Additional readings²

- Ito, M., Soep, E., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Zimmerman, A. (2015). Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45(1), 10-29.
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., ... & Watkins, S. C. (2013). Connected learning: An agenda for research and design.

²There is no expectation to do these readings, but I include them as additional suggestions for related readings.

Session Two: Digital ethnography

February 4

+ How can we understand what we do online?³

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Choose a community (250 word statement): What online community are you interested in studying? What questions do you have?

Reading

- Kozinets, R.V. (2010). Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online.
- Webster, J.P. & Marques da Silva, S. (2013). Doing educational ethnography in an online world: methodological challenges, choices and innovations.
- Nardi, B. (2010). My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft. Ch. 1 & 2.

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Reading discussion activity

Part Two

- Research question development

Part Three

- Project planning time

Why these readings?

Although ethnography has a long and rich history, digital ethnography is still relatively new. With many kinds of data available to us online, conducting digital ethnography requires taking some time to think about the affordances and limitations of various kinds of data. How does this data help you understand what you're trying to study? I hope that these readings offer some overview of what might be possible when we study online communities.

Additional readings

- (Video) Salmons, J. (2018). Studying Online Communities: Ethics & Virtual Ethnography
- Williams, M. (2007). Avatar watching: participant observation in graphical online environments. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 5-24.

³I expect that most of you will want to engage deeply in an online community rather than choose one of the alternate options. The assignments listed under "Making" are currently scheduled as such for those of you spending time in a community. If choosing to do an alternative project, we'll work together to define weekly assignments that support your desired learning trajectory.

Session Three: Observations and noticings

February 11

- + What can we notice online?
- + How can we record what we have noticed?

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Project time: spend some time participating in your online community of choice and document it in your design journal (500 words + 1-5 screenshots).

Reading

- Pink, S. (2013). Short term ethnography: intense routes to knowing.
- Markham, A.N. & Baym, N.K. (2009). How Can Qualitative Internet Researchers Define the Boundaries of their Projects?
- Maharaj, N. (2016). Using field notes to facilitate critical reflection

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Project Q&A

Part Two

- Field notes practice: turning jottings into notes

Part Three

- Field notes sharing

Why these readings?

If this is your first foray into research, then it may feel overwhelming to tackle a large research question over a short period of time, and I hope that these readings help you gain a better sense of the scope of your own project. If you have engaged in research before, then I hope that these readings may spark questions for you for how you might modify your current processes for collecting and analyzing data so that they work better for your needs. Because field notes can be an intensely personal experience, and there is no one-size-fits-all process, we'll be exploring a couple different ways to observe and record what we see.

Additional readings

- Maxwell, J., Huberman, M. & Miles, M. (Eds). *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*. 2002. London: Sage Chapter 2: Understanding Validity in Qualitative Research
- Pacheco-Vega, R. (2019). Writing Field Notes and Using Them to Prompt Scholarly Writing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
- Kendzior, Sarah (2013). On Legitimacy, Place and the Anthropology of the Internet. <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2013/02/13/on-legitimacy-place-and-the-anthropology-of-the-internet/>

Session Four: Sharing and censorship

February 18

+ How can we decide how much to share online?

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Project time: spend time (at least 1 hour) in your online community and collect 1-2 sets of field notes. Write a memo in answer to your research question: what do you know, based on the data you have? What do you not know?

Reading

- Abelson, H., Ledeen, K., & Lewis, H. (2008). Ch. 7: You Can't Say That on the Internet.
- Matias, J. N., & Mou, M. (2018, April). CivilServant: Community-led experiments in platform governance.
- Jeong, Sarah (2018). Ch. 1-2 of *The Internet of Garbage*.

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Reading activity

Part Two

- Preparation for guest speaker

Part Three

- Guest speaker (TBD)

Why these readings?

I believe strongly in the social nature of learning, and yet even as we encourage others—and ourselves—to share online, we need to also consider the challenges of participating in online platforms. I have chosen these readings because they offer examples of what's at stake, as well as what might be possible.

Additional readings

- Campbell, C. (2018). Gaming's toxic men, explained. Polygon. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/7/25/17593516/video-game-culture-toxic-men-explained>
- Nam, C. (2016). What We Value: Equity, Efficacy, and Self-Protection. <https://yppactionframe.fas.harvard.edu/blog/reading-ypp-action-frame-ii-equitable-effective-and-self-protective>
- Abidin, C. (2018). Three Lies of Digital Ethnography. <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/02/07/three-lies-of-digital-ethnography>

Session Five: Participation

February 25

+ Who is able to participate online?

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Project time: spend time (at least 1 hour) in your online community and collect 1-2 sets of field notes. Write a memo in answer to your research question: what do you know, based on the data you have? What do you not know?

Reading

- Esmonde, I. (2016). Power and Sociocultural Theories of Learning.
- Anderson, E., Walker, J., Kafai, Y. B., & Lui, D. (2017). The gender and race of pixels: an exploration of intersectional identity representation and construction within Minecraft and its community.
- Ringland, K. E., Wolf, C. T., Faucett, H., Dombrowski, L., & Hayes, G. R. (2016). Will I always be not social?: Re-Conceptualizing Sociality in the Context of a Minecraft Community for Autism.

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Guest speaker: Kristen Guth, Head of Research, Reddit

Part Two

- Connections between projects and the readings: whose voices have you heard? Not heard?

Part Three

- Final portfolio and presentation overview
- Project work time

Why these readings?

I first encountered the piece by Indigo Esmonde in a book called *Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences*, and this book has since influenced my thinking about ethical relationships between researchers and participants, as well as how we conceptualize of learning environments more broadly. I hope that the other readings offer generative examples of how to explore power and privilege in the context of your own projects.

Additional readings

- Lampinen, A., Huotari, K., & Cheshire, C. (2015) Challenges to Participation in the Sharing Economy: The Case of Local Online Peer-to-Peer Exchange in a Single Parents' Network. *Interaction Design and Architecture(s). Special issue on peer-to-peer exchange and the sharing economy.*

Session Six: Supporting others

March 3

+ How can we support others in learning online?

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Project time: prepare the first draft of your project portfolio + your reflective project memo (750 words).

Reading

- Papert, S. (1993). Chapter 4: "Teachers".
- Brennan, Karen. 2015. "Beyond technocentrism: Supporting Constructionism in the Classroom."
- Greenhow, C., & Askari, E. (2017). Learning and teaching with social network sites: A decade of research in K-12 related education.

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Reading discussion activity

Part Two

- Project draft feedback (with the help of critical friends)

Part Three

- Guest speakers: Sarah Otts and Christian Balch, Scratch Team

Why these readings?

Now that we've spent some time in various online communities, I am hoping that we can step back and think about our roles as both learners and teachers. I love this reading from Seymour Papert as a way to think about teaching, and of course I am biased, but Karen Brennan's thoughts on how to weave together technology and constructionism in classroom settings have been enormously influential in my own work. The Greenhow & Askari piece also offers an overview of the ways in which teachers have sought to integrate online platforms into classrooms.

Additional readings

- Haduong, P., & Brennan, K. (2019, February). Helping K–12 Teachers Get Unstuck with Scratch: The Design of an Online Professional Learning Experience. In *Proceedings of the 50th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education*(pp. 1095-1101). ACM.

Session Seven: Looking back and moving forward

March 10

+ What have we made/learned?

+ What do we want to share with others and carry with us?

Before class

Making

- Respond to readings (500 word reflection)
- Prepare your presentation and project portfolio!

Reading

- hooks, b. (2003). Time Out. Classrooms without Boundaries.
- Freire, P. (1998) Seventh Letter: From Talking to Learners to Talking to Them and with Them; From Listening to Learners to Being Heard by Them.

Reflecting

- Post your reflections in your design journal
- Respond to others' reflections in their journals.

During class

Part One

- Project presentations!

Part Two

- Module reflections

Part Three

- Letter to self

Why these readings?

At the end of the module, I hope that these readings inspire you as they have inspired me. I love the visions of what might be possible in learning environments that bell hooks and Paulo Freire describe, particularly in terms of how we as teachers might learn alongside students.

Credit

- Figure 1: Online Communities: XKCD, 2007, <https://xkcd.com/256/>
- Figure 2: Online Communities 2: XKCD, 2010, <https://www.xkcd.com/802/>
- Syllabus inspiration from: Karen Brennan, Eve Ewing, Adrienne Keene, Gretchen Brion-Meisels
- Related syllabi: [Digital Ethnography at OII with Eric T. Meyer](#), [Anthropology of Internet at eUNH with Svetlana Peshkova](#), [Digital Anthropology at UCI with Tom Boellstorff](#)
- Inclusivity statements: <https://twitter.com/eveewing/status/1076871459673391105?lang=en>

Other readings

- <https://hbr.org/2020/02/the-era-of-antisocial-social-media?ab=hero-subleft-2>
- <https://www.fastcompany.com/90373954/done-with-facebook-and-twitter-heres-how-to-start-your-own-private-social-network>
- <https://runyourown.social>