Beyond C U L8R: Disengaging from online social worlds

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Abstract

People who work, learn, or play in online social worlds must sometimes leave those social worlds. Such departures may happen for many reasons. Often they are anticipated departures because the social world was meant from the start to be temporary. Most people do not yet have much practice at leaving an online social world, nor do we have a good model of the process. Activities that people undertake while disengaging from transient online social worlds affect them personally, as well as their future personal and professional relationships with one another. For this research, thirty students near the time of graduating from an online learning master's degree program participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their activities and emotions related to disengaging. The result is a model of the disengaging process encompassing twelve dimensions.

Key words: disengaging, online community, social worlds, virtual community

How do I leave when I'm not going anywhere?

An examination of members' planned departures from transient online social worlds is a needed addition to the growing research of virtual community. People who work, learn, or play in online social worlds – an ever-increasing number – must sometimes leave those social worlds. These departures may happen for many reasons, but often such departures are planned, even anticipated, because the social worlds are meant from the start to be temporary. Despite the growing number of this type of departure, most people do not have much practice at leaving online social worlds, nor do we have a good model of the process. This paper provides a model of the process a person goes through to disengage from an online social world.

While the previous paragraph used words like 'leave' and 'depart' to describe people's exits from online social worlds, in reality such exits rarely involve physically going anywhere. It may seem more correct to say that people 'stop participating.' Without a physical move, the act of leaving focuses on technology and relationships rather than on geographic settings. This in turn highlights a main reason we need a model of disengaging. Information and communication technologies (ICT), and their use to support interaction within social worlds, may require participants to develop new social skills or to re-purpose skills they have been developing over a lifetime of departing from face-to-face social worlds.[i] Designers, managers, and participants of online social worlds need to understand these skills if they are to alleviate the difficulties of departure and facilitate desired future interactions.

Social worlds that are by definition temporary are called here *intrinsically transient*. Every member shares the mutual understanding that their participation in this social world will end. Because of this intrinsic transience, even as the members build a community together, they also understand that their community will be dismantled as each member *disengages* when it is time for the social world to end. Examination of this disengaging[ii] process is a key addition to the study of online communities, which has thus far focused primarily on the building and maintenance stages.

One example of a type of intrinsically transient social world, and thus a setting for the study of the disengaging process, is the social worlds created by online learners. Students taking courses or degrees come together only for a limited time, and they know from the beginning that it is limited. Much like transient workers, they know that they will make friends, share confidences, work together, and support one another, but that when the degree is earned and the work is finished, everyone will move on to the next job (Adler & Adler, 1999). This paper provides a discussion of results from interviews with thirty students about their experiences as they prepared to graduate and disengage from an intensive online learning experience. The model of the disengaging process identified through analysis of those interviews includes twelve dimensions. An explanation of the model is followed by implications of this process for research and practice of online learning and other social worlds.

Social World Transience and Disengaging

This research was designed and conducted from a grounded theory perspective, in which 'a researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data' (Strauss & Corbin, 1997, p. 12). The grounded theory that was developed is a model of the process of disengaging from a distributed social world that is supported with ICT. In using grounded theory, although the data are by definition the primary source of theory building, it is not required that one operate in the pretended absence of pre-existing theory. Rather, noting that the above reference mentions 'an area of study,' one can use prior theory and research to help to describe such an area of study. In addition, prior theory and research can also be used as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1997, pp. 48-52), to enhance the research process by providing guidance about potentially meaningful concepts to be aware of during data analysis (p. 49), and helping to formulate research and interview questions (p. 51).

The theoretical perspective that describes the main area of study of this research is social worlds theory. In particular, Strauss' (1978) discussion of the social worlds perspective was used to provide the primary definition of a social world and to shape the approach taken to the research questions. A social world, according to Strauss, consists of people who share activities, space, and technology, and who communicate with one another. For an extended discussion of how social world theory articulates with the traditions of symbolic interactionism and organizational theory, see Adele Clark's 1991 essay 'Social worlds/arenas theory as organizational theory.' She explains in detail, far beyond what would be appropriate here, the development of social world theory including Shibutani's work on reference groups (especially Shibutani, 1955) and Strauss' own line of work extending social world theory (especially Strauss 1978, 1982, 1984). As Clarke describes, social world theory provides a conceptual framework in which we can understand 'diverse social processes' (1991, p. 119). Social worlds theory was used as the basis of this study to provide the conceptual framework from which to begin to explain the process of departure among distance learners.

Taking this perspective allows us to examine the online learning environment as a social world, rather than using the term 'community.' As well, using the social world perspective lets us explore all aspects of each individual's experience, and describe spheres of individual activity without needing to focus on a group-oriented community (see also Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001).

Intrinsic transience

Taking the social world perspective is a first step in providing a background in the research literature for a grounded theory study of people's participation in shared online activities. Not all social worlds are identical, neither those that involve people who share close physical proximity nor those who share virtual proximity. Each world has its own characteristics depending on many factors, including the activities shared by its members, the ethos of the membership, and the kind of communications that occur among members.

The characteristic of a social world of interest here is its transience or permanence.[iii] For a permanent social world, there is an explicit or implicit assumption that members will be members for long or lifetime terms. While social worlds may segment or spawn subworlds, the general understanding of participants is that the social world will continue to exist indefinitely (Strauss, 1984). Many professions as social worlds have an assumption of permanence: once having joined the social world of physicians, a doctor will always be a member of that social world.

In contrast to permanent social worlds, there are transient social worlds. Social world transience has three aspects that affect participants' activities and feelings. First, transience may be inherent to the social world. In this case, the social world is meant to come to an end. Second, transience may be associated with the individual participant rather than the social world. In this case, while the social world may persist, individual members come and go. Third, transience is not restricted either to co-located or to distributed social worlds. This research focuses exclusively on distributed social worlds that are transient and use ICT as their primary means of supporting interaction among participants.

A social world that is temporary by its definition is referred to here as *intrinsically transient*. The term *intrinsically transient social world*, or ITSW, refers to the temporary shared experience of online social world participants. In an intrinsically transient social world (ITSW), all of the members understand that their shared experience will come to an end. There are, of course, many different ways to provide boundaries for the concept of intrinsic transience (e.g., How many people need to be involved? What are the shortest and longest time spans that still 'count'?). Here however the primary focus is on two basic aspects of intrinsic transience: that it is inherent to the social world (rather than to individual participants) and that at the same time it is mutually understood by all participants.

Disengaging

The study of intrinsically transient social worlds includes a focus on the act of departure. When every member's participation is temporary, everyone must leave. The act of departing or disengaging from transient online social worlds has received little attention in the literature. Some recent work has addressed related issues. These have focused primarily on endings that are

in some ways unplanned and/or problematic (Bruckman & Jensen, 2002; Hampton, 2003; and Kolko & Reid, 1998) rather than anticipated and planned, though Jablin (2001) provides instead an organizational perspective (and uses the term 'disengaging' as is preferred here). Much of the literature about online community, however, has focused on the description, building, and maintenance of such communities (e.g., Babbie, 1996; Baker & Ward, 2002; Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Burnett, Dickey, Kazmer, & Chudoba, 2003; Dickinson, 2002; Fox & Roberts, 1999; Haythornthwaite, 1998; Kennedy, 2000; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Rojo & Ragsdale, 1997; Smith, 1999; Weedman, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Studies of the communications media, virtual community participants, special interest newsgroups, text chat environments, and even 'emoticons' contribute to our understanding of how humans develop and maintain relationships online.

In addition to social worlds theory, other research and theory were used as explained above to provide guidance about concepts that were meaningful to the disengaging model and to help formulate the research and interview questions. This study drew on three major areas to provide such guidance: migration preparation, gerosociology, and transient groups.

Migration preparation involves the study of people who are getting ready to leave their country of residence permanently or semi-permanently (Rousseau, Drapeau, & Corin, 1997; Rousseau, Said, Gagne, & Bibeau, 1998). Studies in this area indicate that people's experiences while they are preparing to depart one place affect their success in achieving a stable, successful situation after their migration. This idea, that a departure from one social world might affect a person's success in subsequent social worlds, is particularly important in examining intrinsically transient social worlds. This is especially so because participation in such social worlds may lead purposely to a *logical next world*. For example, students earning a master's degree in library and information science might be expected to join the social world of information professionals. That would be their logical next world. It is possible, also, to have more than one logical next world. These students might also be expected to join the social world of alumni who graduated from the same program.

Another area of research related to disengaging is gerosociology (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Newman & Newman, 1999; Quinnan, 1997). Aging people may prepare for many types of departure, and for different types of relationships to end. They may move from a large house to a small one, or from a familiar neighborhood to a care facility. They may also be separated from family, friends, and their spouses. Studies of these transitions highlight an important feature of disengaging as a process. Not only do people actively disengage themselves, but they are also sometimes encouraged by other people or by society to disengage. Being aware of these multiple motivations for disengaging prevents us from viewing it as a process that individuals complete by themselves, or as an invariable process that each person completes the same way. It is also a process shaped by other people and social world influences.

A final helpful area of research is that of transient groups (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000; Gersick, 1988; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Group theory was not chosen as the theoretical basis for this study, but rather acts as a contributing theoretical area (as we are looking at the collective online activity here as a social world rather than as a group). For a more general review of group research, see Arrow, McGrath, and Berdahl's (2000) introduction to their volume, 'Small groups as complex systems.' For a review of older research, see McGrath's (1991) introduction to his time, interaction, and performance (TIP) theory. Some specific pieces of group theory proved useful in the current research to influence the data collection and

analysis. Although an intrinsically transient social world may be larger than a 'group' and may also last longer (years instead of hours, weeks, or months for a transient group), there are elements from the studies of transient groups that relate to social world disengaging. Tuckman and Jensen added an 'adjourning' stage to their group process model, one of the earliest acknowledgements in the literature that the ending processes of transient groups are of interest. Arrow et al. (2000) and Gersick (1988) developed further models of group processes that not only recognize the importance of a phase similar to disengaging, but also indicate that the disengaging process begins much earlier than the last days of a group's existence. Knowing that members may begin to disengage some time before they actually depart indicated that it was important to examine the process from an early stage. This point is also echoed by McGrath's (1991) characterization of 'non-Newtonian' time as experienced by group members during different stages of group processes (p. 163).

A major factor that distinguishes the social world seen in this research from a 'group' is seen most clearly in McGrath's (1991) discussion of the TIP theory of groups. It is explained throughout that discussion that a group normally has a shared problem, project, or goal that is the primary objective of the group's shared activities. In a social world such as the one studied here however, there is no shared specific problem, project, or goal. Social worlds such as the social world of, e.g., cancer researchers may be dedicated to a fairly unified purpose (see Strauss, 1984) but the members are not trying to develop, together, one solution or product. It is true that groups are occasionally formed within the social world of online learners, for example project groups within classes, but they are not the focus of study here.

Research Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

Research setting: the ITSW of LEEP

The master's level distance education option (called LEEP[iv]) offered through the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign served as an exemplar of an intrinsically transient social world (ITSW) for this exploration of the process of disengaging from online worlds. Interviews with thirty LEEP students near the time of their graduation reveal multiple dimensions of the (often complex) disengaging process. The disengaging process helps to shape the future relationships that online learning graduates have with one another, socially and in their shared profession. Disengaging affects the relationships that graduates have with the institution they have left behind. Disengaging also affects how graduates continue to use the various technologies they used for online learning, and how they transfer their technological expertise into new arenas.

The social world of distance learners is 'intrinsically transient,' and thus will come to a predictable end, but the participants in the LEEP program make emotional and functional commitments to one another and to the program itself. The learners in this environment engage with each other from the beginning of their time in the program, creating strong bonds of friendship and providing one another with emotional support. They also create intensive working relationships that involve frequent communication (see also Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000, for more details). In addition, LEEP takes a position of primary importance in the lives of students while they are in the program. Although the life-changing aspects of the LEEP experience are beyond the scope of this paper, they have been explained in detail by Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2001) and Haythornthwaite and Kazmer (2002).

What happens, though, to participants' shared relationships and their intense focus on the program when the time comes to graduate? Looking at the community-building that occurs among distance learners Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) made it clear that near the end of their time in the program, students were disengaging from the shared social world, separating themselves from their relationships within it and decreasing their focus on it. After they spent a few semesters building community, LEEP students dismantled their shared learning worlds. Also, individual students disengaged from their involvement in the LEEP community. That initial study of LEEP students did not include interviews with enough graduating students to let us understand or describe this disengaging process in detail. The research described in this paper was a separate study with different research participants, designed to explore the disengaging process.

To understand more about these participants and the LEEP world they occupy, it is useful to describe the basic operations of LEEP (for many more details about LEEP, see Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004). Each summer, students begin the LEEP experience with an intensive two-week on-campus session (called 'boot camp' by the students). Students who attend boot camp together are called a cohort. After boot camp individual students determine their own trajectory through the master's degree program, both in terms of course load and course selection. As a result, some students complete the degree more quickly than the majority of their cohort, and finish in as little as one year. Most of a cohort will finish within three years, with a few students taking much longer (up to a maximum of seven years) to finish. In the middle of each semester, students come to campus for required meetings, one day per course they are taking. The rest of the time, they use a variety of technologies including email, threaded web discussions, synchronous chat, audio lectures, telephone and snail mail to support their course-related activities and social communication. Course assignments are generally submitted as web pages. When they have completed the program, students may participate in 'virtual graduation,' a webcast of the on-campus graduation ceremony.

The LEEP program was chosen for this study because it represents all of the general characteristics associated with an intrinsically transient social world. Thus the findings about disengaging, as discussed below, may be applicable to – and certainly lead us to appropriate research questions about – other transient social worlds.

The next section provides a brief description of the data collection and analysis methods that were used for this study. Then, the following section provides details about the disengaging process itself, including quotes from some of the students. The final section explores some of the implications for disengaging on the practice of online learning and virtual community.

Research questions and their relation to ICT

The general proposition posed by this research was developed out of the earlier study reported in Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robbins, and Shoemaker (2000), as well as through careful analysis of the cited literature above, and is based on the conclusions drawn as already noted. This general proposition is that people participating in a distributed intrinsically transient social world, in which they rely primarily on ICT to support communication and other shared activities, will change their activities and attitudes as they get close to the necessary departure time, engaging in a process of disengaging from that world. The research questions that guided this study were developed from the reviewed literature and addressed the nature of the changes

in activity and attitude of people who are disengaging by focusing on the following three areas: (a) the changes in emotions and activities participants have as they disengage from a transient social world, (b) participants' recognition of the need for disengaging and how their preparations for disengaging affect their involvement in other social worlds, and (c) the changing relationships and roles of participants disengaging from a transient social world.

The stance taken in this research is not that the disengaging process as described here will be unique to 'online' environments to the exclusion of 'offline' environments, nor was this study designed to explore the 'effect' of technology on the process of disengaging. Further, this study does not attempt to compare 'online' versus 'offline' departure processes. Rather, the questions were focused to explore how people in an ICT-supported environment enact this process, and to let participants introduce the supporting technologies where they found them to be meaningful for their own responses to the interview questions. In the end, there may be good reasons for readers of this paper to wonder how this process is different from any other educational disengaging process. For example, status passage theory indicates that people use their past experiences with a process to shape their activities within and perceptions of the next time they undertake a similar process (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Since this is a master's degree program, participants all have prior experiences in post-secondary education on which to draw.[v] The focus in this study is how the process is enacted within a particular type of environment, in this case a distributed ITSW, by participants who regularly use ICT to support their shared activities.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected via semi-structured interviews with thirty LEEP students. Questions guided participants to talk about their experiences at the end of their time in LEEP. The interview questions emerged either directly from the research questions and therefore from specific concepts or theories enumerated in the literature review; or, in keeping with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), findings from the previous grounded theory study reported by Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) were also used to build questions for this study. Thus, questions about preparation for post-LEEP experiences were informed by the pre-migration literature. Interview questions about the pressures and influences on disengagement from the LEEP social world and from other social worlds in which the student was a member emerged from gerosociology theories. The process of data collection, interviewing participants during the months leading up to graduation, was influenced by the group process theories. A number of basic demographic and other instrumental data were also collected, to verify that the participants were appropriate for this study and to probe their attachment to, or engagement with, the LEEP social world in general. Second-round interviews included three kinds of additional questions. One question verified whether or not the student had graduated as expected, and why. In cases where participants did not graduate when expected, their reasons help shed light on potential problems that prevent successful disengaging at a pre-planned time. A second set of questions allows for tacit and explicit comparisons across interviews, asking participants to respond either to a similar question as in round one (tacit comparisons) or asking them to compare current activities or emotions with their own remembrances of past activities, emotions, or expectations (explicit comparisons). Finally, some questions addressed completely new ideas that came out of first-round interviews. These concepts included faculty employment references, post-departure relationships with LEEP faculty and staff, graduation ceremonies and celebrations, and post-departure assessments of the LEEP experience.

Participants in this study were master's degree distance students enrolled in LEEP who were within two semesters of graduation. This created a fairly broad range of time (as measured by each student's stage in the master's program) for data collection. Talking with students during their ultimate and penultimate semesters shows the trajectory and acceleration of disengaging as it occurs over time. Also, it mirrors the prior study on community building in the LEEP environment, in which students were interviewed during their first two semesters. For the current study, fifty-five interviews were conducted over the telephone, tape-recorded and transcribed. Eighteen students were interviewed twice, before and after they graduated. These interviews allowed us to examine disengaging activities that occurred while students were still in the program and those that occurred afterward. Six students were interviewed twice after graduation, allowing us to focus on post-departure disengaging activities. The remaining interviews took place with students before graduation.

The interviews were analyzed using the techniques and procedures of grounded theory outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This qualitative method uses the basic techniques of questioning and making comparisons within the context of a close examination of the interview data. The analysis is interactive and on-going throughout data collection; that is, each interview and round of interviews is analyzed beginning as soon as it is completed and continuing throughout the project data analysis. This continuous analysis is used to design the further data collection instruments, which then act as a 'feedback loop' with more focused exploration of emerging important ideas. These techniques are then used throughout the processes of coding and memoing to build up the overall analytic narrative and the specific concepts and sub-processes that are characteristic of the process being studied.

How Disengaging Proceeds

The analysis indicated that disengaging is a twelve-step process, comprising twelve dimensions in three broad temporal categories:

Dimensions that span membership and disengaging:

1. Experiencing intrinsic transience
2. Entrainment with a cohort

Dimensions that relate to the final months of disengaging before departure:

3. Managing time
4. Shifting focus
5. Pursuing goals
6. Adapting role and identity
7. Moving support
8. Changing footing of relationships
9. Joining logical next worlds

Dimensions that span the end of participation and completion of disengaging after departure:

10. Taking leave and graduating

11. Disengaging from the cohort

12. Closing membership

The steps of disengaging, as outlined in the above list and figure, are discussed in detail throughout this section. This discussion of disengaging is framed in terms of the LEEP distance learning ITSW, and generalizations to other types of social world are found in the next section.

The disengaging process begins just as students enter the LEEP program, long before they are thinking about graduating and moving on to their next job or personal goal. The disengaging that will happen near the end of their time as distance learners is shaped by the community building that happens near the beginning, and by the social/working relationships students form with one another. It is in part because students build ongoing supportive relationships while they are in the online learning program that they have to disengage at the end. Those relationships are important to students' success in the program, but the more involved the students are in their shared learning community, the more they will have to disengage from at the end.

As suggested by the earlier research mentioned above, and further indicated here, most of the disengaging process happens during the last few months before graduation. At that time, disengaging students are most active about breaking ties with friends from the program, renewing friendships elsewhere, and making sure they have established a position in the logical next world. A small amount of disengaging occurs during and after graduation, when the students say their farewells to each other and relinquish their last ties to the online world of students.

The following discussion of disengaging describes the twelve dimensions in approximate chronological order as participants experience them through their disengaging. The students interviewed for this study provided hours of rich interview data, all of which contributed to the model of disengaging. The quotes from their interviews that are included in this section demonstrate how actual participants spoke about their LEEP experiences, and were selected because they exemplify sentiments expressed by other participants as well (i.e., they were selected precisely for their 'ordinariness', rather than for uniqueness). Quotes are identified by the pseudonym of the participant who made the statement. Pseudonyms reflect the gender of the participant. Some quotes contain the mark […], which means that identifying details have been removed from the quote in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

Early Steps in the Disengaging Process

The first two dimensions of disengaging start long before students are ready to graduate. The first is that students *experience intrinsic transience*. Students are aware from the beginning that their LEEP social world will come to an end, and that awareness affects how they develop relationships with other students. The awareness of intrinsic transience also provides students with a way to support themselves emotionally during their time in the program. It gives them a way to reassure themselves that their 'real' lives and relationships will be back to normal at a predictable, and therefore manageable, time. Experiencing intrinsic transience allows students to

minimize the impact of their membership in the online social world on their outside relationships and leisure activities, because they can suspend involvement with them for a finite amount of time.

After graduation, Jennifer reflects on her intense focus on LEEP and her knowledge that it would only be for a two-year period. She explains her experience of intrinsic transience:

> What worked for me was saying, I'm cutting these two years out, and I'm really going to, you know, I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it well, and it's going to be over, and then it's going to be a part of me. [Jennifer, one month after graduating from LEEP]

The second early step of disengaging occurs as students *become members of their cohort*, the students who enter the program together each July.[vi] Membership in this social world begins with a shared two-week face-to-face experience with the cohort, and each participant's experience throughout their time in the program is heavily influenced by the cohort. The relationships that students build during that time endure throughout participation. In addition, the progress of the cohort provides a reference by which participants gauge their own progress through the program. At the end, participants must disengage from the cohort as well as the larger social world of LEEP.

Soon before she graduates, Edith reflects about how she bonded with her boot camp friends by sharing two weeks with them on campus:

> You always seem to bond most with the people that you start your original cohort with because, um, you're there for two weeks with them. Versus one or two days, or just a classroom day for any other groups. And a lot of times there were people that have started in my cohort that would be in other classes. And so, I had a roommate that was, I think she was assigned to me when we started, and her and I ended up staying roommates each time we came back to campus, until she graduated earlier than I did. [Edith, one month before graduating from LEEP]

Active Disengaging Near the Time of Graduation

In the last few months of their time in the program, students realize that the end of their time together is rapidly approaching, and start to disengage actively from the LEEP social world in a variety of ways. At this point, students have been working with their cohort for several semesters, taking courses, maintaining friendships among their online classmates, and anticipating earning their degrees.

First, the *length of time* spent in the social world, as well as the pacing of progress and the allocation of resources (such as money) during membership, becomes acutely important to students as they prepare to disengage. Near their departure from LEEP, students develop keen awareness of the amount of time they have spent in the program and awareness that the end is very near. This newly acute awareness motivates participants toward disengaging, and also leads them to allocate carefully resources of time and money in anticipation of imminent departure.

Also near the time of departure, students start to *shift their focus* to relationships and activities outside the online social world of school, toward their physically local social worlds. During the final semester, students pay less attention to LEEP, both to their relationships with others in the program and also to their schoolwork. Instead, they focus on outside activities, from the routine (such as gardening) to the eventful (such as family gatherings). In addition, because of expertise developed during membership, participants do not need to focus as intently on their

activities in LEEP—and the supporting ICT—in order to perform them well. Finding that the technology finally runs smoothly and that creating a web page for an assignment is no longer an arduous process frees the students to pay attention to other things.

Martha, a recent graduate, explains that her focus has shifted from LEEP, and also from her family and friends, to professional activities:

> I'm kind of really focused on my job right now, because I want to do a good job, and I want to learn things. That doesn't mean that my family and my friends are unimportant to me, but I kind of feel like I've got a handle on that, so I'm pretty much really constantly thinking about what sort of professional activities I need to engage in. [Martha, one month after graduating from LEEP]

This quote also shows Martha adapting her *role* to match what she is expected to do as a member of the logical next world of the profession after she departs LEEP. Both of these aspects of disengaging are explained further, below.

The third major shift that students go through as they get close to graduation involves a change in their *goals and motivations*. Within the LEEP social world, students change their goals from successful participation to successful disengaging. While they may still want to perform well academically, many students admit that their primary goal is simply to be done. Students also find motivation in the immediacy of their move into their logical next world. They begin to seek the goal of higher status in other social worlds, especially the professional world they are joining by earning the degree.

Here, Hank indicates during his last semester as a student that he is less focused on school work because, though he is determined to complete the degree and knows he must earn grades high enough to fulfill requirements, the drive he felt at the beginning of the program to excel in every class has faded. This change of goals is part of disengaging:

> [T]he work I do for LEEP, I would say that it has, it started out fairly strong and then it probably peaked in that one […] semester and it has dwindled somewhat just because now it's just sort of a matter of keeping up. Whereas there was a while when […] I was willing to put in much more time than was necessary, to get things done just because I really wanted to get things right. [Hank, one month before graduating from LEEP]

At this point in disengaging, students realize that time has run short, and in their excitement to be finished they begin to focus away from LEEP, toward goals outside the degree program. As they do so, they begin to take on the *new identities and roles* that are associated with graduation and with moving into the logical next world of the information profession. Students' roles change within the program, as they become experts within the social world and also prepare to be ex-participants. For example some students take the lead on group homework projects while earlier in the program they did not do so. Other students go so far as to ask to be excused from group projects, because they are focused on finishing and are no longer interested in the role of 'team player.' Disengaging students also start to take on their future identities as professionals and as graduates of the program.

In changing their role from that of a contributing team player within the learning social world to that of an individual student wanting to finish the program expeditiously, students also find themselves *changing their locus of support*. Rather than interacting frequently with and relying on other students for emotional and functional (e.g., with school work) support, the disengaging student turns instead to people who are physically near, such as family, friends, and

co-workers. One particular kind of support that is very likely to shift is that of mentoring. Disengaging students who have developed a mentoring relationship online with a faculty member from LEEP often develop new mentoring relationships with someone from their physically local workplace.

Not all relationships from within the online social world are forsaken in favor of local ties. Some of the relationships that students developed inside the social world *change footing* (Goffman, 1981), as frequent computer-mediated interaction and shared activities give way to infrequent contact and remote professional networks. To put it simply, friends who shared the emotional hardships of a demanding academic program become colleagues who share infrequent emails and coffee at conferences. This is not a thoughtless or purposeless process. Disengaging students work to understand how their relationships will continue after membership, when the shared activities and technology of the LEEP social world are gone. A fairly obvious finding is that disengaging students lose touch with one another, and decrease the frequency of their interaction.

For example, Evelyn finds that her relationships with her LEEP friends have changed as they have all disengaged from LEEP. She hopes that infrequent emails will suffice to maintain these friendships:

> I suppose that I don't feel like I have to have a whole lot of contact to still consider these people my friends and colleagues. You know, I don't think it's the quantity of contact that we have, but the quality that we'll have later on that will keep us, you know, in touch with each other. [Evelyn, three months after graduating from LEEP]

Many of the changes associated with disengaging are predicated on the student being successful in *joining the logical next world* by securing a position as an information professional or librarian. This is a goal on which disengaging students focus quite intently. They will not have a place in which to practice their new role as a professional with a master's degree if they do not have an appropriate job. Graduates who do not find a professional position also do not have a new workplace to provide support as they shift away from their LEEP classmates.

Many students already have a job in an information setting. Their preparation for joining the profession primarily involves smoothing the transition from the LEEP social world to the professional world. Disengaging students who do not already have a job in the professional world work primarily on securing such a position. Only then can they look toward smoothing their transition out of one social world and into another.

Here, for example, Vivian must decide whether to look for a job in the new town before she moves there and while she is taking four classes in LEEP. She elects instead to wait until she finishes the degree and moves to her new home, thus separating the job-seeking part of disengaging from the degree-completion part:

> And what I wanted to do was go ahead and finish up so that I could find a job in this area in my profession as a professional. So I could either have taken two classes this semester and two classes in the spring, finished up next spring, and looked for a job again, because I would have had to have looked for a job this last fall. Or I could just do a blitz, finish up in a few months, just live on his salary, and then find a professional position. […] I'm going to take some time, probably about a month, because that'll be holidays and I'll just take that time off, just to kind of regroup, and then just really start looking for a job. And in the area that I'm in. (Interviewer: So you're not job hunting now then?) No, not with four classes. There's no way. [Vivian, two months before graduating from LEEP]

This quote from Vivian also demonstrates other aspects of disengaging: managing time (above), as she adjusts her course schedules to accord with successful disengaging; and closing membership (below), as she indicates her plan to end participation, take a break, and then move on her next tasks.

Completing Disengaging

By the time of the actual graduation date, most students have almost completed their own disengaging from the LEEP social world. *Graduating* provides a ritual, in which students may participate online or on-campus, to mark the end of participation in the program. Though the disengaging process takes time, graduation is a definite moment of ending. Near the time of graduation, LEEP students *take leave* of one another. As they say their final farewells, they prefer to do so face-to-face. Indeed, this reflects the fact that each student's experience is shaped by their cohort experience. The cohorts met and bonded face-to-face at the beginning of the program, and most students want to say farewell in the same way.

Some students do not feel ready to leave. This is especially common for students who have not secured a job in a professional setting, but that is not the only reason for reluctance. For example, graduates of this program who have never before worked in an information setting may not feel ready to do so even upon completion of their required coursework. Whatever the reason, such students sometimes purposely delay their graduation date (e.g. by taking additional classes) in order to give themselves more time in LEEP.

Dolly describes seeing her cohort friends and taking leave of them during their final on-campus visit. This quote also shows the intrinsic transience of each cohort's LEEP social world, as Dolly reacts to the changing population of the LEEP program as a whole:

> I suppose it was a little bit poignant but we didn't really dwell on that. You know, like the dinner that we went out to. Because we all knew it would be, we didn't know when we're going to be together again. But really we didn't play that up. Because most of the time we're not together at all. And then we did go to the LEEP dinner, which I always go, but I didn't go this time. Because, we kind of stopped by, before, cause that was the night we were going to go out to dinner to a real restaurant. [W]e kind of looked around and to tell you the truth I didn't really recognize too many people, and so it wasn't like oh, I want to be here so I can see people. Cause I didn't really, you know what I mean, this was like a later in time thing, whereas the first on-campus was really wonderful cause you were like, oh my gosh, I get to see everybody again and this is fun and I can talk to people. [Dolly, two months before graduating from LEEP]

A major part of becoming a member of the LEEP social world was joining the cohort at the beginning of the program. Now, at the very end of disengaging, students take the step of *disengaging from the cohort*. This occurs when students stop thinking of themselves as cohort members and of their cohort as the primary reference of progress toward graduation. Instead, disengaging participants begin to think of themselves as individuals earning a degree and securing a position in the profession.

After graduation, former students are very quick to *fill in* time that was taken with participation in the LEEP world, time spent primarily in front of the computer, and *close up* their memories of that participation. Students rapidly forget details of their membership. Just as quickly, they fill in the time left open in their schedules by the absence of LEEP activities. Only one aspect of the last step of disengaging keeps them tied to LEEP for a little while longer: the

new graduates often find that they need to tie up any final loose ends of membership by doing things such as forwarding their email and requesting last-minute job references.

A recent graduate, Violet explains vividly how she has completed disengaging from LEEP:

> I really don't give it a whole lot of thought anymore, like I said. I really don't think too much about it. […] you do feel like you're a part of something when you're in it, but then when you go back to your own life, you look back and … You had all those friends you thought you'd keep in contact with, and then a year down the road, you've all separated and grown differently and have other priorities. And the priorities that you had prior to going into LEEP have resurfaced again and taken the important place in your life where they were in the beginning. They were sort of swept under the rug for a year or two. [Violet, three months after graduating from LEEP]

These twelve steps of disengaging, and the overall process that comprises them, indicate how members of an intrinsically transient social world disengage from that world when their time of necessary departure is near. The specific details about each of the twelve steps demonstrate some of the activities and items that are particularly important to people who are disengaging from such a world. The next section includes a discussion about why disengaging is important, and the implications of the disengaging process for practice and for research.

Significance of Findings and Implications for Research and Practice

Disengaging from any ITSW

In this research, LEEP provided an exemplar of an intrinsically transient social world that allowed us to build a grounded theory in the form of a model of disengaging. Thus the primary result of this research study is the understanding and description of the disengaging process, discussed in the previous section. In addition to that model however, the disengaging process based on data collected from LEEP students may also apply to other ITSWs including, for example, virtual work teams, geographically distributed researchers working on a project, and online wedding planning discussions. The results of this research answer an important question about the process of disengaging: Why bother to worry about it? Why can't members of an ITSW simply leave when it is time for them to go?

These questions can be answered using the new understanding of the disengaging process. For any ITSW, problems that occur while members are disengaging can have negative consequences for their departure from the ITSW, their entry into logical next worlds, or their future interactions with each other.

This model can be used to help us to understand and begin to answer some questions about what happens when participants are unaware of their need to disengage, or unwilling to do so. In such cases of problematic, or dysfunctional, disengaging, the model built here indicates that the specific difficulties that participants are likely to have fall into the following areas:

- Members forget about, repress, or deny intrinsic transience, thus attempting to 'hang on' to a world that is being dismantled around them as other members disengage.
- Members have difficulty finding emotional and task support in their logical next world, and therefore have trouble shifting their reliance away from their ITSW support networks.
- Members have no logical next word to which to move, or they find securing a position in the next world problematic.

- Members find that there is no support for them to take leave of one another, either through the medium or the ritual they prefer.
- The technological infrastructure changes abruptly or unexpectedly, making changes in relationship footing among departing participants hard to negotiate.
- Members find themselves out of step with their cohort for any reason, making it hard for them to disengage from the cohort and bringing them into conflict with new members.

Understanding the disengaging process for any ITSW means understanding what people need to do for successful disengaging and where they might encounter problems. The above list indicates a few such problems. Understanding the chronological process of disengaging is useful because it allows us to anticipate what problems will arise, and when they might arise, and suggests ways to provide proactive support to mitigate such problems. Returning to a few items from the above list of potential problems with disengaging, and applying the chronology of disengaging, clarifies how such problems may be alleviated.

A participant who is having trouble recognizing the intrinsic transience of the social world is also unable to start the disengaging process. While such members require support, they may also need encouragement to find support elsewhere and to acknowledge that their time in this social world must end. This may be accomplished by facilitating some of the more active parts of disengaging, such as shifting mentoring and social support, taking leave of fellow members, and participating in departure rituals. This also highlights an important balance in supporting disengaging activities. Support should be given without making the current ITSW so warm and comforting that participants have a hard time tearing themselves away.

Those who are unwilling to disengage may encounter other problems; in the LEEP social world, there is a university administrative rule that limits the total number of years students may spend in a degree program. In social worlds without such administrative constraints, other mechanisms may need to be put into place to encourage disengaging activities. Setting deadlines or other time limits is one such option, but since disengaging is a process that takes time, it is also important to make people aware of the need to disengage so they are able to develop alternative plans. In this study, there were no instances of participants who wished to extend the disengaging process but were not able to do so. In other settings, that certainly may happen, and further research is needed to explore how best to support people who wish to disengage more slowly from an online social world but are unable to do so.

One other kind of dysfunctional disengaging found in this study was the cohort ‘laggers,’ those who found themselves still students but surrounded by students from other beginning cohorts rather than their own long-term friends. Such participants spent the last few months in LEEP in a state of suspended disengaging; they had said farewell to their friends and support networks, but not to their activities within the social world. Realistically, as in many arenas of life, there may not be a satisfactory way to support such participants. A small number of problematic disengagers may be a normal part of the process.

Difficulties with the presence or absence of the appropriate media or rituals for disengaging point to problems in institutional or technological infrastructure that should be addressed. For example, the disengaging model indicates that participants’ expectations for how leave-taking should occur are shaped by their earlier experiences in the ITSW. Thus in order to support disengaging near the time of departure, it is important to be aware of the circumstances in which

ITSW members originally bonded and what effect those may have on their leave-taking. It is also important to be aware that those circumstances may include issues of co-location, communication medium, or participation in specific activities.

Social worlds that are not intrinsically transient

Understanding the disengaging process may also help ease departures from social worlds that are not intrinsically transient. When participants expect a social world to last indefinitely and find themselves suddenly or unexpectedly needing to leave, they cannot have been aware of intrinsic transience (and thus done the kind of preparing that is assumed by the model created here). Such unplanned and/or problematic departures have been addressed as noted above by Bruckman and Jensen (2002), Hampton (2003), and Kolko and Reid (1998). We can speculate here about ways that understanding the disengaging process might have helped in those cases, or that disengaging did occur.

For the residents of Netville who lost the high-speed Internet access that was promised to them by the developer of their housing subdivision (Hampton, 2003), perhaps if the company who operated the high-speed access had been willing to facilitate a disengaging process (in addition to their offer of a dial-up modem) there would have been less dissatisfaction among the residents when they initially found out about the loss of access. On the other hand, it is apparent that the residents of Netville did enact some of the steps of disengaging, indicating that the model can work for worlds that are not intrinsically transient. For example, they changed the footing of their relationships with one another as their virtual proximity declined, leaving them to rely on their physical proximity instead.

The denizens of MediaMOO who vacated their shared online space (Bruckman & Jensen, 2002) certainly enacted some of the steps of disengaging. Some participants proceeded on to logical next worlds in a process described as a ‘graduation’ (p. 23). Many participants shifted their goals in such a way that their goals were no longer met by MediaMOO. Bruckman and Jensen suggest that a way to handle that kind of departure in an online forum is to acknowledge that such membership turnover will exist (they call this a ‘stage of life’ model, p. 30) – that is, to acknowledge intrinsic transience inherent in the participation of individuals. Forum operators can thus anticipate disengaging processes and structure the forum in such a way that it can sustain individual disengaging without the forum simultaneously being dismantled.

Aspects of the disengaging process found in this study also echo conclusions drawn by Kolko and Reid (1998) in their study of virtual community failure. The changing of identity and role as an aspect of disengaging provides for a kind of adaptability of self that allows individuals to disengage in a way that does not constitute a personal or social world failure of the kind described by Kolko and Reid. The process of changing the footing of online social world relationships as part of disengaging may be a first step toward the kind of ‘expression of multiplicity and situatedness within single instances of an individual's online presence’ (p. 227) that Kolko and Reid look forward to in future ‘virtual communities.’

In the organizational realm, recent literature shows a trend toward supporting downsizing ‘survivors’ within the workplace but not the downsized employees themselves (Burke, 2002; Niehoff et al., 2001, Weakland, 2001). A few mentions are made of companies that help their downsized employees find new jobs (e.g. Ullman, 2001) but other articles only warn that downsized employees should be ‘handled’ so that they do not vent their frustration through corporate sabotage (e.g., Vijayan, 2001).

Using an understanding of the disengaging process to help people through unexpected departures goes further than job seeking assistance and could reduce the need for alarmist 'handling.' A few organizations have tried some of the measures suggested here (e.g., Schu, 2001) but lack the systematic approach afforded by the disengaging process. Such a systematic approach might include the following measures: helping people to ease the transition to a next world; helping them implement knowledge from the old world in the next world; creating a specific time for saying good-bye face-to-face. At the same time, it might be helpful to encourage people to think about ways to change the footing of their relationships after departure, thus preserving relationships that would falter due to the loss of shared circumstances.

Some specific implications for educational settings

Understanding disengaging has implications for educational settings beyond the LEEP program. Online learning is an increasingly common arena for the creation and dissolution of transient 'virtual' communities. Educators and researchers have begun to explore the relationships that graduates of distance learning programs have with each other and with the educational institutions from which they have graduated (Pennsylvania State University, 1996; Lesht & Schejbal, 2000; Levy, 1999). Continuing personal and professional relationships among graduates, continuing professional development by further education and training, and recruitment of new students provide specific examples of post-graduate activity. Distance learning programs can better support each of these activities if they better understand students' departure processes. As members of the learning social world, students are the primary shapers of the disengaging process: Students are the ones who select their course loads, apply for jobs, and adjust their relationships. However, faculty and technical staff in online learning programs also play important roles that shape disengaging. Understanding what students are trying to accomplish during disengaging can help faculty and staff to make decisions and best support disengaging.

Some specific opportunities for faculty and staff to help disengaging students were suggested by this study. By the time students reach the stage of disengaging, they have many ideas about what they believe 'works' in distance learning. Distance learning programs might find it useful to ask their graduates what they thought 'worked,' and consider those suggestions for improvement. As well, graduates say that they use school resources as sources of information. They not only rely on class project Web sites, archived audio lectures, and course reading lists as information resources; they also start to use the Web-based discussion mechanisms as an information resource rather than a communication medium. Understanding how alumni are likely to use such technological artifacts of membership might help guide procedures for archiving access (see also Lynch, 2002).

Additionally, students who do not already work in the profession or field they are studying may benefit from help in their transition to the logical next world of work. Such help should go beyond aiding them in identifying available jobs and providing letters of reference. These students also could benefit from help in implementing their learning at work.

Future research directions

In order to make this model a more robust grounded theoretical representation of the process of disengaging from intrinsically transient social worlds, further research is needed. This study had some limitations, primarily because the setting is so limited. Not all online social worlds will be transient, of course, and few are populated solely by adult learners at the graduate level.

Analysis of the data from this project, and the findings about the disengaging process, strongly indicate the necessity for two additional types of research: more extended longitudinal work, and studies of different types and instances of ITSWs.

Another inherent limitation of this research is the absence of focus on the distinctions and articulations between 'online' and 'offline' activities of the participants. Some of these have been reported and analyzed extensively with respect to LEEP by Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2001) and by Haythornthwaite and Kazmer (2002). While the research interviews in the current study yielded much rich data from the participants about their activities in multiple social worlds (these data are what yielded the disengaging model found in the above discussion, with components such as 'logical next world' and 'shifting focus' that rely tacitly on a multiple social world perspective), they did not focus directly on an 'online/offline' dichotomy. Perhaps future research interest lies in these distinctions and articulations.

More longitudinal study

When the participants in this study were interviewed two or three months after departure from the ITSW, they were still adjusting to new jobs, discovering how their ITSW friendships will evolve over time, and recovering from the tiring experience of LEEP. Interviewing participants after another six months, another year, and another two years should provide a better picture of how the activities of disengaging affect future activities and relationships.

The need for more longitudinal study is not limited to this study or this population, however. This research indicates some research questions that it will be important to ask in future longitudinal research with any ITSW:

- How do ITSW relationships change over time, during and after disengaging? How do former participants continue to interact with one another? How do the social networks that ITSW members build become part of former participants' ongoing social networks?
- How do participants' expectations of future relationships relate to how such relationships actually evolve?
- How do relationships with people outside the ITSW (e.g., relationships with family and friends) recover from the effects of ITSW membership?

Study of different ITSWs

Despite its role in this study as an exemplar of an ITSW, the LEEP social world has features that distinguish it from other social worlds. Members of the LEEP world are adult learners earning a master's degree and tend to be highly motivated to excel academically. They often have careers, families, and established homes. In addition, LEEP itself is different in some ways because it is an educational environment. LEEP occupies a constrained time frame of approximately one to three years, while other ITSWs may be longer or shorter in duration. Intrinsic transience in LEEP is determined by the event of earning the degree, while other ITSWs may have an end point determined by time (or by a different kind of event).

Studying disengaging in ITSWs with features different from those LEEP will help to refine the disengaging process by identifying which dimensions of disengaging are common to all ITSWs and which are specific to LEEP. Such study will also help to reshape specific properties

of disengaging. For example, all disengaging processes include a dimension of time, but perhaps participants in different kinds of ITSWs allocate or think about their time differently. Or, if all disengaging includes a change in identity, perhaps when or how identities change differs for other kinds of ITSW. Study of disengaging from other ITSWs might also include the following research questions:

- In what ways is ITSW participation a life-changing experience? LEEP students and graduates have indicated in this and other studies that LEEP has been a profoundly life-changing experience for them, in contrast to research such as Adler and Adler's (1999) in which participants have chosen transience as a way of life. Will that be true of other ITSWs? What kinds of ITSW provide life-changing experiences and what kinds do not? How is disengaging different in an ITSW that does not provide such a life change?
- How do family and friends of an ITSW participant experience the ITSW from the outside? How do friends and family think their relationships with the ITSW member change during and after participation? How do the experiences of family and friends compare with those of the ITSW participant?
- How do changes in ITSW friendships while disengaging reflect the individual disengager's usual friendships patterns? How do individual participants' idiosyncrasies affect the disengaging process overall?

One other topic of interest for future research is continued knowledge sharing. People often have expectations, implicit and explicit, about what knowledge people will have after they work together. First, people expect to have knowledge about the specific project or task they worked on. Second they are also expected to 'know' the people, providing entrée into an additional team of people or functional area of an organization ('You worked with some people in accounting, can you talk to them and find out …?'). How people are able to meet such expectations may be affected by how they disengaged from the social world. There are a number of examples from this study that might translate to a different kind of social world. For example, knowing a person does not guarantee the ability to contact them, especially if the technological infrastructure to support a change in footing was absent (e.g., lack of a robust email forwarding method). Conversely, going through a bonding experience and a successful footing change together might, instead, leave participants very comfortable with initiating future contact. Future research might provide helpful insights about how supporting the disengaging process can facilitate post-membership knowledge sharing.

Conclusion

Intrinsically transient social worlds end, and participants must depart in some way. Their disengagement takes much time and energy during the last months of participation, and also shapes members' future relationships and activities. When researchers assume that predictability and expectedness render such departures simple, they fail to acknowledge complexities of interpersonal relations, of transitions into other worlds, and of reallocating resources dedicated to the ITSW. Some writing about group theory have said that a planned and expected ending 'raises few interesting questions' (Arrow et al., 2000, pp. 214 & 219), and that 'endings that are logically implied by the purpose of the group require little explanation' (Arrow et al., 2000, p. 222). Some organizational theorists indicate a similar position, that 'simple closure' of an organization that has achieved its mission makes a less interesting study than unexpected, messy endings (Hager, Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Pins, 1996). Such research often focuses on the

causes of group or organizational endings, and in that case, planned endings do not provide much data. Shifting research focus to the effects of intrinsic transience on individuals and their future relations reveals that interesting questions and explanations do emerge.

An attention to disengagement will allow degree-oriented distance education programs to improve alumni relations, new student recruitment, professional success of alumni, and emotional and instrumental support for graduating students. Supporting students through disengagement leaves them feeling confident in their jobs, willing to reach out to prospective students, and looking forward to continuing professional relationships. People who work to develop, or participate in, many types of intrinsically transient online social worlds should be able to use the results of this research to work on supporting their members as they leave, both instrumentally and emotionally, and supporting the disengagement process in a way to facilitate desirable future results. This research also may have implications and provide further explanation for the success or failure of future knowledge sharing.

Endnotes

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[i] My gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the term 're-purpose' to describe this process.

[ii] The word 'disengaging' and the phrase 'disengaging process' are used rather than 'disengagement.' Disengagement has connotations related to states of anomie and uninterestedness, while the activity described here as disengaging reflects a carefully articulated departure process.

[iii] A distinction between transient and permanent social worlds is also found in language used online, such as in the Virtual Worlds Review, which is dedicated to 'persistent online social virtual worlds' (see http://www.virtualworldsreview.com/index.shtml).

[iv] For more information, see http://leep.lis.uiuc.edu

[v] In fact, the interview instrument contained a within-subjects comparison question about participants' own experiences with online and offline departures. The grounded theory coding process did not identify any new concepts from that question. What emerged again however was that students find LEEP to be a life-changing experience unlike other education experiences, a topic covered in detail in earlier papers as noted.

[vi] There have been some smaller cohorts that began the LEEP program in January, but most cohorts begin in July.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the LEEP students and graduates who participated in these interviews and without whom this research would not have been possible. Data collection for this project was supported by a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Research Grant. Thanks also to Gary Burnett, Caroline Haythornthwaite, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

This paper has been accepted for publication in New Media and Society and the final (edited, revised and typeset) version of this paper will be published in New Media and Society by Sage Publications Ltd,