

“I NEED TO JOIN THE GROUP, THEN I’LL KNOW EVERYTHING” LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A BASIS FOR MUTUAL LEARNING AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines informal communities—such as scouting groups, prepper networks, and rural women’s circles—as environments for adult learning and social resilience. Drawing on a qualitative ethnographic study of nine diverse communities in Poland, the research explores how these groups function as spaces where knowledge is co-created through shared practice and interaction. Using in-depth and dyadic interviews, the study analyzes participants’ motivations, learning mechanisms, and the impact of community involvement on personal and professional trajectories. The findings reveal that learning emerges organically through observation, imitation, feedback, and the exchange of experience, fostering the development of social, intrapersonal, and specialized competencies. Furthermore, the paper identifies diverse strategies of knowledge verification—ranging from practical usefulness to relational trust—which influence communities’ resilience to disinformation. The study concludes that informal networks constitute a vital infrastructure for lifelong learning and play a significant role in strengthening social resilience in contemporary societies.

Keywords: *Learning communities, informal learning, mutual learning, social resilience, disinformation.*

1. Introduction

Is belonging to a scout group, a prepper network, or a rural women’s circle merely a form of social engagement—or something more profound? This paper examines how such informal groups function as living spaces of learning, where knowledge is co-created and shared through everyday practice. Contemporary adult educational processes are undergoing progressive autonomization, a result of expanding the space for individual cognitive freedom (Malewski, 2006). In late-modern societies, this phenomenon is accompanied by an increase in subjective attitudes and emancipatory aspirations. Education is ceasing to be an exclusively institutional domain and is becoming a "lifelong process in which the individual acquires attitudes, values, and knowledge from daily experience" (Tabor, 2011). We are observing an increasing ambiguity in forms of informal learning, which is reflected in the number of diverse local and supra-local initiatives in the field of lifelong learning. Learning communities occupy a special place as sites for the intensification of reciprocal development among them. They can be defined as groups of people connected by shared interests, regular interactions, and a practice that collectively produce knowledge (Bielaczyc & Collins, 2009). At the core of these groups lies the adaptation of behaviors and the transmission of values (Blachowicz, 2017). Participants develop shared meanings, values, and understanding through interaction, which forms the basis for common future actions (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007, as cited in Den Boer et al., 2019).

Early research by Greenfield and Lave (1982) identified this mode of learning as characteristic of pre-industrial societies, where learning occurred through observation, imitation, and demonstration embedded in everyday activities, and where learners assumed responsibility for their own progress. In this article, we extend these insights to contemporary, often hybrid communities that combine physical and virtual participation. Following Czubak-Koch (2014), we recognize that social relations, as the backbone of these groups, provide cultural frameworks that facilitate learning, including values, norms, customs, and narratives. Such informal networks, constituting the organic grassroots layer of civil society, can—and often do—respond to gaps in formal and non-formal education, as well as to emerging civilizational challenges.

We move beyond a narrow understanding of knowledge transfer to explore how communities foster social competencies and shared narratives that encourage openness to learning. This leads us to the concept of resilience—the capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity. We argue that resilience is a collective resource strengthened by coherent cultural narratives and shared practices (Hammood, 2025).

Our central thesis is that learning communities cultivate collective resilience by helping individuals adapt to change and integrate evolving identities. Finally, we examine the extent to which these networks protect members from misinformation or, conversely, increase their vulnerability to it.

2. Objectives

This paper is based on the results of an extensive qualitative study of an ethnographic nature. The project was oriented toward exploring the potential of communities as environments supporting lifelong learning. The main goal of the research was to conduct a case study and comparative analysis of selected communities in terms of their educational potential. We sought to understand the motivations underlying the establishment of these communities, the nature of participation within them, and how members position this experience in relation to other forms of learning and self-development. The study aimed to identify the opportunities, risks, and limitations associated with these informal practices.

The research material presented in this paper is organized into four key thematic areas. First, we examine the factors that ensure the longevity and cohesion of these communities—the “social glue” that sustains member engagement over time. The second area focuses on the architecture of knowledge and modes of learning; here, we analyze how these groups facilitate learning, through which mechanisms and processes this phenomenon occurs, and what trajectory the knowledge produced in this way follows.

The third section addresses the challenge of misinformation. We explore the extent to which these communities are exposed to conspiracy theories and alternative, non-scientific sources of knowledge, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these risks. Finally, the fourth area investigates the external dynamics of these groups, specifically how they manage and structure their relationships with the broader social and institutional environment.

The paper addresses the following key questions: What makes a community a learning community, and to what extent does participation in it constitute a meaningful educational experience?

3. Design

Case selection was based on the definition by Bielaczyc and Collins (2009). Due to the broad scope of this definition, additional selection criteria were introduced:

- The sustainability of the community: minimum 2 years of group operation.
- Size: over 10 active members.
- Regularity of interaction: physical meetings (minimum once a quarter) and digital activity (minimum once a week).
- Theme: the focus of group activities was chosen to correspond with contemporary social problems and civilizational threats, such as: environmental degradation, identity tensions, health and well-being, coping in crisis situations, and the impact of new technologies.

The research was conducted in diverse locations, including both metropolitan areas and smaller urban centers across three provinces in Poland. Due to the bottom-up nature of the groups, the recruitment process was supported by desk research analysis and the personal contacts of the researchers. The gatekeepers played a key role, facilitating access to the community and helping to establish relationships with participants. While the selection of communities was purposive, the recruitment of individual members proved more complex. We sought diversity in terms of age, gender, and educational background. Participants were primarily recommended by gatekeepers as highly engaged members who were willing to participate. This approach significantly facilitated access to the field, as many of these communities display a high degree of distrust toward outsiders and require a “guarantor of discretion” and a mediator of trust to legitimize researchers’ presence. Consequently, nine diverse communities were selected for the study: 1) a women's circle focused on gymnastics, 2) a rural housewives' club, 3) the Woodbadge scouting community, 4) a men's outdoor collective, 5) traditional karate enthusiasts, 6) an IT meet-up, 7) bird enthusiasts, 8) a group of babywearing mothers, and 9) a community of ethnic minority representatives.

4. Methods

In each of the studied groups, 5 IDI interviews and one dyadic interview were conducted. The use of in-depth interviews (IDI), dyadic interviews allowed for a deep description of the educational practices occurring within the groups. Dyadic interviews served to better capture the internal organization, group dynamics and their relationship with the environment. Individual interviews, in turn, allowed for an exploration of personal motivations and individual approaches to learning, which became the background for understanding the communal experience as a specific form of education.

The study comprised 45 individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 9 dyadic interviews. The sample was gender-balanced, with a slight predominance of women, and participants ranged in age from 25 to 85. Individuals under the age of 18 were intentionally excluded, as the research focused on adults who had already completed their formal educational trajectories. The collected material was professionally transcribed and subsequently analyzed using the latest version of MAXQDA.

5. Findings

Despite analyzing nine distinct communities—differing in subject matter, size, geographic location, and their balance between physical and virtual interaction—we identified a significant common denominator. This enabled us to categorize the factors operating across these diverse groups in relation to the four dimensions outlined in the introduction. In the following sections, we examine these elements in greater detail.

5.1. Continuity and engagement

The success and vitality of informal learning communities can be measured by their sustainability, understood as consistency of action and the sustained commitment of members to engage. Analysis of the studied communities allows for the identification of recurring factors that contribute to this stability.

Among these integrative "binders," we can identify several key elements:

- A key factor is the formation of a shared identity based on common values, attitudes, and narratives about reality. These groups develop their own linguistic and cultural codes, and their identity is reinforced through rituals, customs, and shared language.
- Shared Goals and Values, e.g., a commitment to the local environment, the need for development.
- Shared Experiences: in several communities, we observed similar life and professional trajectories among members, which significantly strengthens mutual bonds.
- Empowerment and agency: membership provides a sense of agency and impact on the immediate environment. Within the group, members gain confidence, autonomy, and the ability to realize collective interests (e.g., securing better terms for training or funding workshops).
- Affiliation and Self-Expression: The sense of belonging is often described using the "treehouse" metaphor—a sanctuary from daily life where one can be their authentic self.
- Preservation of Heritage and Knowledge: A vital binder is the desire to ensure that the group's legacy endures. In groups focused on local heritage, this manifests as a sense of "blood brotherhood" and the preservation of local traditions. In professional organizations, it takes the form of a need to reproduce unique, expert knowledge to prevent it from being lost.
- Internal authorities play a crucial, though non-homogeneous, role. Preliminary findings suggest that there is no single, universal path for their emergence.

However, the foundation of continuity and engagement lies primarily in the spontaneous and authentic relationships formed through regular contact. Collective action itself constitutes an especially important bond—regular meetings, events, and joint initiatives become, for members, the foundation of lasting relationships.

5.2. Knowledge architecture and learning dynamics

In the second area, focusing on the architecture of knowledge and learning mechanisms which in the studied communities are characterized by remarkable richness. Although members of most groups do not recognize education as their main goal, and the need for self-development is not always the primary motivation for joining, there is a general consensus among them that participation in the community contributes to the multidirectional development of personality. We demonstrate that support for learning within these communities operates across several distinct dimensions:

- Knowledge: this dimension encompasses the continuous exchange, verification, and enrichment of information, as well as its sharing within the group.
- Skills: learning unfolds through practice-based modalities such as observation, imitation, demonstration, and guided instruction.
- Attitudes: communities cultivate specific values and orientations, including reciprocity, diligence, and commitment. They often promote the sharing of knowledge as a "gift culture" and foster collective narratives about the intrinsic value of learning.

Beyond the explicit exchange of knowledge and skills, the studied communities perform a range of developmental functions that significantly shape participants' learning trajectories. First, they provide a space for enhanced self-knowledge. Through feedback, mutual observation, and participation in shared activities, individuals gain a deeper understanding of their strengths, talents, and personal limitations. Being

seen in action by others becomes a powerful mechanism of reflexive learning. Second, communities function as a form of social “testing ground.” They offer a relatively safe environment in which members can experiment with new roles, test competencies, and navigate diverse social situations. These communities constitute a unique space for shaping social competencies (collaboration, conflict resolution) and intrapersonal ones (self-awareness, emotional regulation, self-insight). This experiential dimension strengthens both confidence and adaptive capacity. Third, participation facilitates the acquisition of practical life skills such as household management, fatherhood practices, cooking in challenging conditions, and health-related knowledge. Learning is embedded in everyday practice and emerges organically from shared activity. Fourth, communities operate as a kind of “skills marketplace.” Members become aware of the collective potential of the group—who possesses which competencies, from whom one can learn, and whom it is worth inviting into collaboration. Fifth, communities act as a “lens on the world.” They broaden participants’ horizons by exposing them to new topics, experiences, and perspectives—even for those living in small towns or socially homogeneous environments. Sixth, engagement fosters political competencies and empowerment. Members develop a stronger sense of agency, subjectivity, and autonomy, learning how to articulate their positions and act collectively. Finally, communities generate a circulation of energy. As members exchange ideas, support, and initiatives, enthusiasm is sustained, motivation is reinforced, and collective action becomes self-propelling. This dynamic contributes to the durability and vitality of the group.

Through these multifaceted processes, knowledge is not merely transmitted but actively co-created and sustained as a living, dynamic resource. The knowledge produced by the studied communities has a specific character: it is often characterized as unique, difficult to access, and uncoded. As Polanyi (2005) would argue, this is a classic example of tacit knowledge. It remains dispersed across the individual experiences of various people. At the moment of meeting in a community, it may—though not as a rule—be organized in the form of chronicles, digital repositories, or conference materials. However, the need for systematic codification of these resources often remains unacknowledged, indicating an untapped potential of the studied communities in terms of the permanent collection and distribution of generated knowledge.

5.3. Resilience to disinformation

The issue of information credibility and resilience to disinformation is closely linked to the unique specificity of the bonds of a given community. Methods of validating knowledge differ depending on the community model:

- In action-oriented groups (e.g., Outdoor): the main verifier is the practicality and utility of the information.
- In groups based on a student-master relationship (Karate): the guarantor of the reliability of the message is the authority of a single leader.
- In intimate groups, based on emotional support (e.g., women's circle): closeness and kindness legitimate knowledge—information gains credibility because we trust the person or group sharing it.
- In professional groups (IT meet-up): reliability is built on verified materials and/or based on data, facts, scientific sources, and the authority of experts built on their achievements and years of experience.

Strategies for dealing with disinformation range from bottom-up collective verification and the provision of alternative sources, through direct interventions by leaders, to the deliberate suppression of worldview-related conflicts. The latter serves primarily to protect the cohesion of the community from polarization. From the conversations, it appears that communities may, but do not necessarily, support non-scientific or socially harmful thinking (e.g., conspiracy theories). The risk of disseminating alternative interpretations of reality is shaped by multiple factors, including the way authority figures influence the group, the mechanisms used to verify information, and the attitudes and values that prevail within the community. If the community is not founded on uncritical subordination to the majority, the defense mechanism operates as follows:

- Participants can maintain their own opinions without fear of exclusion, which favors the coexistence of different worldviews.
- Alternative theories are not treated as revealed truth but stop at the level of another lens for looking at reality.
- A space is created for "another perspective and understanding of the world," which does not necessarily degrade science but serves the search for meaning and the expansion of the repertoire of behaviors.
- There remains a risk that members within the group will prove susceptible to unreliable knowledge; however, this involves individuals rather than the entire collective.

5.4. Relations with the environment

Communities serve multiple social and educational functions. For some, they act as a safe haven—a space to meet like-minded individuals, allowing authenticity and psychological comfort. For others, they provide access to entirely new social microcosms, where encountering people with vastly different experiences requires adopting new perspectives. This diversity fosters openness, empathy, and respect for alternative viewpoints, countering social polarization. The relationship between communities and their environment depends on educational needs and degree of formalization. Spontaneous, bottom-up groups focus on self-education and often remain separate from the wider environment, whereas formalized groups with public-oriented goals frequently collaborate with local authorities and social partners, educating both members and their broader communities.

6. Conclusions

The interviews conducted demonstrate that communities focused on learning and practice—regardless of their articulated goals or primary member motivations—contribute to lifelong learning across multiple dimensions. They foster the acquisition of new knowledge and skills while shaping social competences and attitudes that enhance an individual's overall readiness and capacity to learn. As a result, participants' understanding of the world becomes less superficial gaining depth across multiple levels of experience and reflection.

A key finding is that these groups bolster members' resilience in the face of oncoming change. They facilitate identity integration and the transition into new professional, social, or familial roles. These communities serve as stable, secure environments where authenticity is nurtured and where "timeless," proven practices are not only preserved but also modernized. Prime examples include Rural Women's Circles, which leverage new technologies for promotion; "Mom-communities", which serve as vital hubs for parental knowledge; and IT Meetups, where experts pass on their legacy to new generations.

Often, the knowledge accumulated within these communities is tacit and uncoded, making it socially inaccessible and difficult to incorporate into formal or non-formal educational curricula. It possesses a deeply practical dimension, rooted in the lived experience of its members. However, does this mean learning communities are flawless? Our observations indicate that depending on their organization, dominant values, and the level of subordination to local authorities, these groups can become insular and cultivate non-scientific knowledge. There is a persistent temptation to develop conspiracy theories or rely on pseudoscientific sources. It also raises an important question for a given community: which is more essential—consensus and cohesion, or tolerance for diverse viewpoints—and what are the limits of this tolerance, and to what extent are they necessary?

The question remains: how should we support such communities? The key lies in preserving their grassroots, spontaneous character and keeping them free from the procedural rigidity of formal education. Nevertheless, a crucial systemic direction should involve supporting group leaders—specifically by encouraging the codification of knowledge and fostering an awareness of misinformation.

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