

# ***Athenian Democracy & Networked Learning Communities***

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## **Abstract**

The Athenian democracy is worthy of study if for no other reason than that it was inspiration for many academic fields. This project highlights some institutions and policies of the Athenian democracy, during its flowering in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, in order to interpret them for the benefits of networked learning communities. Concepts such as *ephebes* and the *power of reward* can be applied to both the ancient and digital era, without implying an exact parallel. New members (ephebes) need training to create their e-portfolios, acquire digital literacy and epistemic fluency to be eligible to contribute to and benefit from community management. Discussion forums could be an arena for dialogue and information exchange. Allocating labor, e-community managers could fulfill the potential of technology-enhanced learning and tutors would be able to select and distribute resources that could be useful and applicable. Praxis and democratic ideals are mirrored in the framework of an economy of knowledge. Epistemologically speaking, an economy of knowledge can be seen as a theory for acquiring the full benefits and costs of coming to know and use knowledge. This theory of knowledge could be a core concept in network learning. This theory does not presume full knowledge, but it does presume democratic social construction of knowledge. On ontological grounds, subjectivity implies that there are always some alternative constructions available to choose from in dealing with the world. The reliability of democracy increases as different points of views transformed into a socially 'agreed' way of interaction and participation. The dark side of democracy more closely related to NL communities could shade mainly the ideas of irrational decision, monoculture (single, homogeneous culture without diversity) and demagoguery. To illuminate dark corners of democratic e-communities, a form of 'aristocratic democracy' is used as a metaphor for the social regime. The term, aristocracy, in the Greek sense of the word, means that the best rules in every domain. To top it all, cultural pluralism could light democratic e-communities, with creativity or conflict that can promote critical thinking and dialogue. Praxis and further research are required to test the validity of the theory presented.

## **Keywords:**

Ephebes (new members), Poli, Power of reward, Networked learning communities, e-Community managers, Knowledge economy, lifelong learning, Street-level epistemology, Constructionism, Epistemic fluency, Dokimasia, Klepsydra .

## **Introduction**

During the course of history, people form alliances, political parties, societies, associations and communities of practice to share and exchange commodities, ideas or find social support and national or personal identity. Bickford and Wright (2006, p. 42) explain that e-communities form shared values, and agreement on goals because teams have powerful qualities that shape learning and motivate its members to exceptional performance. In the field of educational research, there is an on-going dialogue about democratization, open resources, self-regulated learning and social networking. What needs to be clarified is that Democracy does not mean freedom from any form of control. It presupposes training (real life-experiences, epistemological awareness), logos (critical thinking), ethos (ethical criteria), and skillful governance.

Aristotelian philosophy (*The Politics*, 335 B.C) is one that influences democratic practises, based on the concept that man is 'political being' by nature. Every action, learning, voting, working has direct or indirect political (social) impact on the society (poli). In this philosophical background, learners and tutors have political duties and rights, living within a community with laws and customs (Reynolds, 2009).

Networked learning communities, committed to helping adults pursue their interest in lifelong learning, is the focus of this project. Networked learning societies have been influenced by the democratic principle that learner-to-learner interaction promotes the inner dialogue and consequently transformative learning. Furthermore, universities have embraced flexible Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs to open and cater to new markets for higher education. The ground has shifted quickly in favor of the flexibility and power of networked communications technologies to provide service to increasingly diverse and dispersed student cohorts. In order for networked learning to be a viable long-term means of provision, it must demonstrate an ability to support learning in a sustainable way. The challenges are to provide high quality learner and tutor support in networked environments based on logos, ethos and well-organized infrastructure.

The ultimate goal is to design harmoniously balanced networked environments that can be used by different people or institutions with different learning objectives, setting the rules of the game in such a way that users cannot violate them and at the same time, freedom of speech and circulation of information are protected. The Athenian democracy can be described in this framework as an experiment remarkable enough to deserve attention. What policies and institutions helped the Athenian democracy be so prosperous? How can the lesson learnt (on policies and institutions) be interpreted for the benefit of networked learning cohorts?

## **The Focus of the Research**

The ancient Greeks believed that individuals should be free as long as they acted within the laws of Greece. The two most important concepts that the ancient Greeks followed were found inscribed on the great shrine of Delphi, which read "Nothing in excess" and "Know thyself." In the same line of thought, contemporary economics are generally defined as the study production, distribution and consumption of resources according to market demand. Democratization and economics are closely related because the one cannot succeed without the other. Economy of knowledge, learning needs analysis and efficient planning could assist online democracies.

According to Christopher Blackwell (2002) in 508 BC Athens became the first society in ancient times to establish democracy. Democracy came from the Greek words, *demos*, meaning people, and *kratein*, meaning to rule. This form of government was used at a meeting place, which the Greeks called the Assembly (discussion forum). Actually, the people governed themselves, debating and voting individually on almost every issue. The Athenian democracy was not of course, a chaotic situation of mob rule. The Athenians understood the value of checks and balances and of enforcing time for reflection before acting. They understood that professionalism is necessary in certain jobs, that accountability was necessary in most jobs, and that some jobs required absolute job-security. Despite its moments of imprudence, injustice, and indecision, Athenian Democracy came to provide a successful political system, which still influences the way people think in different fields. Therefore, it could be useful to see networked learning communities through this lens. The first stage is how to welcome and support new members.

## **New Members in Athenian Democracy & Networked Learning (NL) Communities**

In Athenian Democracy, young members presented themselves to officials of their discussion forum and were enrolled in the participant list. There were some important limitations taken into account before enrolment. The member should have Athenian parents; further, the new young member must never have avoided fighting a battle or paying his debts. To illustrate further, the new member had to create a very primitive form of e-portfolio (personal profile) before fully participating in the democratic processes. The new members of the assembly had to go through a two year period as *ephebes* (preparation stage) after which they were members of the citizen body (Blackwell, 2002).

In the same manner, new members of e-learning communities should be chosen (or make that decision themselves) according to the ethos (ethical criteria) and logos (critical thinking) of a NL environment. Supporters of democratic ideology often overlook that people need to be educated to respond effectively to the

demanding democratic environment. Thus, appropriate orientation and support can improve the quality of social interaction aiming at life – long exchanges of information.

In the networked learning arena, members with fewer experiences need training to create their e-portfolios, acquire digital literacy and epistemic fluency. E-portfolios (*know thyself*) could be a tool not only for reflection and self-assessment, but also democratic participation in learning. Moreover, digital literacy, adaptation to e-learning platforms and quest for information through online libraries could facilitate interactivity and minimize technophobia (Alkalai, 2004). Educational epistemic fluency can be defined as the ability to recognize and participate in educational discourses. Epistemic fluency develops through interaction with other people who are already relatively more fluent (Goodyear & Zenios, 2007). The correlation between education and democracy is clear. “Education increases the society-wide support for democracy because democracy relies on people with high participation benefits for its support” (Glaeser et al., 2007 pp. 93-94).

## The Power of Reward

Despite the fact that it was a great honor to be an Athenian citizen, every citizen was paid for attending the Discussion forum, to ensure that even the poor could afford to take time from their work to participate in their own government. A historical anecdote recorded in Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians* supports this assertion: In 411, when a group of Athenians temporarily overthrew the democracy and established an oligarchy, one of their first acts was to pass a law that no one should receive pay for political activity, referring to the subsequent regime of 411 and 410. In the 4th century, when Timocrates had proposed that the Athenians loosen enforcement of penalties against those who owe debts to the state, Demosthenes claimed that there would be no money left in the treasury to pay for attendance at the Assembly. He went on to equate that outcome with an end to democracy (Blackwell, 2003). To make a long story short, the Greeks relied heavily on the power of reward, meaning that they benefited economically, ethically and socially from their democratic involvement (Josiah, 2008; Hansen, 1999). Pericles in his Epitaph claimed “that where the rewards for merit are greatest, there are found the best citizens” (Anastasiou, 1986, p.8).

The *power of reward* works as positive reinforcement and enhances social ties within learning communities. Parchoma (2005) adapts French and Raven's work categorizing the power to offer rewards among the five powers that influence the development and sustainability of a virtual organization. In the same train of thought, Parchoma (2005) refers to Laks' work in defining reward power as “the most effective basis for expanding opportunities” and “the fuel upon which the work is accomplished is the rewards received by the people who do the job (p. 472).”

The democratic government of Athens rested on three main institutions, and a few others of lesser importance. The three pillars of democracy were: the Assembly of the Demos, the Council of 500, and the People's Court. In NL communities, the terms discussion forum, e-community managers, and tutors' team will be analyzed aiming at envisioning the democratic ideas without implying an exact parallel.

## Athenian Democracy: The Assembly of Dialogue

The Assembly (the Ekklesia) was the regular opportunity for all citizens of Athens to speak their minds and exercise their votes regarding the government of their city. The Assembly became synonymous with democracy because of participation and dialogue required (Blackwell, 2002).

The discussion forum of e-learning communities could be built in the same mentality as the Assembly. After all, the net has opened a “world of discussion” (Fox, 2002), allowing people to express themselves and learn from one another. Dialogic education draws parallels between democracy and education. It is based on the principle that learners must be seen as subjects acting upon content instead of objects to be acted upon or to receive content. “Don't ever do what the learner can do; don't ever decide what the learner can decide.” (Vella, 2002, p. 16). Once there is conversation there is hope to resolve every conflict. As Habermas argues, in dialogue there is a “gentle but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason” (Habermas, 1979, p. 3). However distorted our ways of communicating are, there is within their structures a “stubbornly transcending power” (Habermas, 1979, p. 3). Salomon (1998), Kreijns (2003) and others emphasized social dialogue as an integral part of learning, rather than something seen as peripheral to the more important task-based activities. Concisely, the more effective the dialectic process, the better democratic education is served.

## **Athenian Democracy: The Council & e-Management**

Blackwell, (2002) describes the Council of 500 represented the full-time government of Athens. It was an advisory citizen body of the Athenian democracy. The Council could issue decrees on its own, regarding certain matters, but its main function was to prepare the agenda for meetings of the Assembly (Discussion forum). The Council would meet to discuss and vote on "Preliminary decrees" and any of these that passed the Council's vote went forward for discussion and voting in the Assembly. Aristotle claims that before taking their seats on the Council, newly selected Councilors had to undergo scrutiny (dokimasia), an audit of their fitness to serve. As far as the online learning communities are concerned, the Council could be e-community managers or Networked workers. Ford (2008) among many others claims that the job of e-community managers is one of the most promising jobs for the years to come.

What would be their role? In some academic settings, online community managers are module conveners (tutors who manage module content and processes). They can act as an advisory body, preparing the agenda for quality teaching and learning. The agenda may aim at increasing demand for highly skilled labor, which can deal fast and effectively with the multidisciplinary challenges of global economy (Baumeister, 2005):

- Be responsible for the effective digital tools (fit-for-purpose tools) used to serve the learning objectives and relieve lecturers for their huge workload.
- Give participants extra incentives to sustain their interest in e-learning and maintain social ties.
- Fulfill the expectations of the knowledge economy and its permanent pressure for innovations.
- Promote bottom up approaches to raise the awareness of the individual participant to new requirements and help educational institutions to adjust organically to the new situation.
- Promote critical thinking.
- Give people choices and allow space for differences.

An e-learning community needs much effort and careful organization to built social trust in order to ensure transparency and information exchange just as the council did ages ago. To achieve efficient e-management of the online democratic community, tutor-module conveners specialized in technology-enhanced learning could help to sustain life-long learning.

## **Athenian Democracy: The People's Court and Democratic Norms**

Of equal importance to the Assembly and Council, was the People's Court. The courts were the ultimate guarantor of democratic rule, and so the juries that ruled those courts had to be as democratic as possible. Timekeeping was also important during the course of trials, to ensure that the plaintiff and the defendant had equal time to speak. Aristotle describes the water-clock (klepsydra) that measured the time for each side's speeches.

The people's court could be tutors within the frame of online communities. Their roles focus on learning outcomes, teaching methodologies and time-management. "The effective online educator is constantly probing for learner comfort and competence with the intervening technology, and providing safe environments for learners to increase their sense of Internet efficacy" (Anderson, 2008, p. 48). Similarly, Bransford et al. (1999) argue that effective learning is bounded by the epistemology and context of disciplinary thought. Thus, online tutors must be very well informed and acknowledge the change from an era of shortage to an era of abundant content that needs careful filtering.

## **Epistemology & Ontological Implications of Democratic Communities**

### **Epistemological perspective or position**

Epistemology justifies truth claims by defining criteria that make a claim true. Democratic ideals could embrace street-level epistemology or economic theory of knowledge. By definition, the Greek words democracy and economy can be broadly translated the former as management of community and the latter as management of personal resources. In other words, it would be difficult to have a socially fulfilling community without effective personal policies.

Hardin (2002) describes street-level epistemology as an “economic theory of knowledge for the ordinary person” (p. 214): why an individual comes to know various things. In Hardin’s economic theory, it makes sense to say that different people get to know different things in the same context. It is ideal in lighting up the democratic NL community because the participants are their own judges. “Each of us sees different things, and what we see is determined by a complicated mix of social and contextual influences and/or presuppositions” (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p.10).

From a different perspective, in standard philosophical epistemology, knowledge is ‘justified true belief’. According to Hardin (2002), street-level epistemology is personal knowledge that can be mistaken. It can be argued though that the members of networked learning societies could make informed beliefs or educated guesses since they are supposed to be trained to the principles of logos and ethos.

The essence of the theory is not characterized by justification but by usefulness for the people involved. After all, street-level epistemology as an economic theory is based on the full benefits and costs of coming to know and use knowledge. It does not presume full knowledge, but it does presume social construction. Therefore, the important aspect to know is how the person has come to have his/her beliefs. Hardin follows John Dewey’s ‘pragmatic rule’ (2002, p. 215): in order to discover the meaning of an idea, ask for its consequences.

This epistemological stance is closely associated with the concept of power of reward. People invest more time and effort when the perceived benefits are greater. The rewards may be intrinsic, extrinsic or both and they could contribute to the knowledge economy (knowledge as a product and tool) (KE), which is a significant force within the learning society.” The influence of the KE across all aspects of life makes it a “powerful social, political, cultural, and educational force” (Parchoma & Dykes, 2008, p. 633).

### **Ontological implications of economic theory of knowledge**

The ontological assumption is subjectivistic: the people view “reality” under different light. The word reality is in quotation marks because the writer and the readers of this project may have different ideological perspectives. Following Personal Construction Theory (PCT), - “observer bias” points toward the construction of reality – even in scientific work. Kelly suggested that the PCT was based on the philosophy of “constructive alternativism”: “to assume that all of present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement” (Kelly, 1955, p. 122). There are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world that can contribute to knowledge economy.

Despite the fact that the process begins with a subjective view, the reliability of democracy increases as different points of views are incorporated into a socially ‘agreed’ way of interaction and participation. This ontological assumption does not infer subjectivity of knowledge itself. The subjects questing for truth interpret their findings according to the economic theory of knowledge (usefulness). Metaphorically speaking - as in Darwin’s theory: *Evolution of Species* - people accept or refute ideas according to their social survival and personality. They choose ideas and praxis that help them to excel at the fast changing world of knowledge and the community benefits as a whole too.

In reference to this project, every community socially constructs the language and norms that ensures or not its future. Each member has to play an active role if his/her view of the world can be seen through the NL communities’ lenses in the knowledge economy arena.

### **The Dark Side of Democratic e-Communities**

Implications and complexities always exist. The purpose of this paper is not to dig deeper in this direction. Different definitions of democratic theory and even anti-democratic ideology keep the debate ongoing. Critics started from Socrates and continue to this very date. The dark side of democracy more closely related to NL communities could entail mainly the ideas of irrational decision-making, monoculture (single, homogeneous culture without diversity) and demagoguery.

To start with, economists such as Milton Friedman and Bryan Caplan (2005) have strongly criticized the efficiency of democracy. They base their criticism on the premise of the irrational voter. Meaning that voters are highly uninformed about many political and social issues, especially relating to economics, and have a strong bias about the few issues on which they are not very knowledgeable. Moreover, the dark side of democracy was

equally gloomy because of prejudices against women and other cultures. The democrats of that age (5th B.C.) strongly believed that non-Greeks could not participate in democratic process due to lack of education and different culture (Papageorgiou, 1990).

The greatest fear of the Athenians was demagoguery. The demagogues were orators or political leaders, who gain power and popularity by arousing the emotions, passions, and prejudices of the people. In the same line of thought, Barry (2000) refers to the work of the Italian thinkers Pareto and Mosca who argued that democracy was illusory, and served only to mask the reality of elite rule. Indeed, they argued that elite oligarchy is the unbendable law of human nature, due largely to the apathy and division of the masses (as opposed to the drive, initiative and unity of the elites), and that democratic institutions would do no more than shift the exercise of power from oppression to manipulation.

To enlighten some dark corners of democratic e-communities, a form of 'aristocratic democracy' could be considered. The terms are translated based on original Greek words as the best rules in every domain. Allocation of labor, according to skill and knowledge could establish 'aristocratic democracy'; that is why, emphasis is put on the ephebes, the preparation stage so that the participants are able to make informed decisions and learn how to negotiate meaning. Lifelong learners have to play an active role in making choices for themselves and their community. As Schumpeter wrote, "without the initiative that comes from immediate responsibility, ignorance will persist on the faces of the masses of information however complete and correct" (1942, p. 242). Furthermore, e-community managers could facilitate social networking by being the specialists. Last but equally important, professors could not only filter the vast information available and assist construction of new knowledge, but also support synergy of different cultures.

Cultural pluralism could illuminate e-communities that are more democratic. Cultures differ in what people develop and contribute to the world civilization (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). Intercultural conflicts are often the most difficult to resolve because the expectations of the disputants can be very different, and there is much occasion for misunderstanding. Community managers and all participants, therefore, could negotiate and share ethics, pedagogy and learning objectives to resolve expected or unexpected conflicts. Aristotle maintained that the well educated in the task and those willing to spend time and effort to pursue virtue- excellence and ethos-should rule and prevail (Papageorgiou, 1990).

## Conclusions

The purpose of the proposal in this paper was not to imply exact parallel between ancient Athens and contemporary Networked learning communities, but to envision a different perspective of e-communities, especially for undergraduates or those less experienced with either social networking or democratic processes. Irrational choices, cultural conflicts, and demagoguery hinder the evolution of online and real time democracies. Democratic policies may alleviate the situation, but they are not panacea. The Athenian political system, albeit only a framework for constructive engagement for all people involved, could promote education and allocation of services and labor that safeguard 'aristocratic democracy'. What needs to be investigated further is how to enhance dialogue and critical thinking by any means to help people make economic decisions related to knowledge construction. In other words, participants could learn how to analyze their needs and quest for information most valuable for their professional practice. Community managers, like the ancient council, could enhance social networking services and relieve tutors from their workload. After all, tutors act as the people's court judge, deciding and planning how to transform learning into real-life experiences. What remains to be seen is how to implement this proposal into praxis.

"Knowledge must come through action; you can have no test, which is not fanciful, save by trial".

Sophocles Greek tragic dramatist (496 BC - 406 BC)

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