The Demands of Liminality:
Community, Communitas, and Reflexivity

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in Community Development with Honours

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research. It contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Richard Beavitt                                Date
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Abstract

An enduring aspect of any notion of community is a sense of being connected to others. It is the experience of communitas - in that sense of the word employed by Buber and later developed by Victor Turner - that brings a particular emphasis and persistence to this aspect of ‘belonging’ associated with community. The disparity between the hopeful ideas placed around community and the often much more chaotic and conflict ridden experience of actually being with others, suggests that communitas needs our consideration. This is particularly so if our involvement with community is to be driven not by a sense of nostalgia or utopian desire, but instead by intention to develop some agency amidst the gradients of power that surround and run through it.

Communitas presents us with a particularly unfettered form of relationship, but one that occurs primarily in liminal environments. Commonly, liminal space is considered to be a moment in time between one state and another, a condition of ‘betwixt and between’. However, this observation avoids acknowledging that the function of liminal space is to provide participants with a reflexive environment, one removed from the normal parameters of social structures. Such a reflexive space, consciously entered and exited, can provide both community members and the community itself with the opportunity to more creatively engage with the world and its own contradictions and conflicts.

Being able to move across the threshold into, and out of, liminal space, places considerable demands on those involved. My argument in this thesis, that liminality and communitas are integral to the functioning of community, leads to the proposal that negotiating the transition in and out of liminal environments requires community members to exercise a degree of individual reflective practice. Schön’s concept of reflection-in-
action is proposed as a suitable meta-skill for operating in this way. Reflection-in-action bears an affinity with the sense of flow engendered by communitas; it also implies a readiness both to reframe questions and respond in an improvisational manner. These two gestures are required in order to meet the demands of liminality.
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INTRODUCTION:

Being involved in community is both rewarding and demanding. Despite any image of unity that the rhetoric of community attempts to create, the actual experience of being and working with others challenges us to be ourselves and yet move beyond our own self interest. Community also presents us with the constancy of change and a realisation that all environments are to varying degrees indeterminate; there are always factors that we either fail to comprehend or which refuse simple boundaries of classification. This thesis considers one aspect of how we might prepare ourselves to engage with the idea of community.

A sense of belonging, of being connected in some way to others, is always part of our experience of community. This may arise due to a variety of factors - ties of family and kin, being part of a still practised cultural tradition, an association with place, a circumstance of events, shared goals, or acting together to satisfy a particular demand. Amidst all these forms of relationship there will be moments which provide an emotional, affective sense of connection, one which exists outside of any of the other reasons for being together.

Such moments have been described as exhibiting communitas. Communitas ‘occurs through the readiness of people - perhaps from necessity - to rid themselves of the concern for status and dependence on structures, and see their fellows as they are’ (Turner 2012, 1); it is a moment when ‘no system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou’ (Buber 1953, 11). Community has this experience of communitas at its heart; it is implicated in the moments when the symbol of community is alluded to and (re)created by a group of people. Communitas is by its very nature ephemeral, elusive. It is not something which can be simply produced on demand.
The experience of communitas is involved in that part of the symbol of community that is an expression of unity. Inevitably this leads to the creation of a border, a line that marks ‘us’ from ‘them’. It can also lead to the assumption that a unity of beliefs is held amongst individuals within the border. Both expressions of unity can become problematic and in the end may potentially legitimise acts of violence and exclusion. However, communitas is not community. Communitas is a relationship that allows us to see each other and our place in the world unencumbered by our history.

As such it is frequently associated with the essentially reflexive environment of liminality. Liminality is one response to the indeterminacy of the world; its function is to create an environment where meaning can be investigated, renewed, or new understandings fashioned. This is a place where difference can be examined, held and seen in a new light. The combination of communitas and liminality encourages responses which are improvisatory in nature, committed to the present but not totally divorced from what has been learnt before.

Modernity has eschewed this type of response in favour of those based in more rational estimations of the world. This has its basis in Enlightenment thought and has led to responses to indeterminacy that are rule based, assume that important variables can be measured and seek pre-ordained outcomes. Such responses become inoperable when indeterminacy presents a set of conditions that are complex beyond the ability of rules, measurement, and hoped for outcomes to describe them.

Community frequently presents just such a set of conditions as well as being the very place where communitas is likely to be found. How can those of us steeped in the ‘knowing’ of a rationalist culture learn to operate in such liminal spaces? How can we move usefully from this way of framing the world that assumes that complexity can be contained? This thesis proposes that the acquisition of skills based in a reflective practice,
leads to an increased ability to respond to the reflexive demands of liminality. This prepares us for the possibility of an improvisatory act; one that challenges us to question, in the moment, what we already know, to not retreat from what we do not yet know, and to be courageous enough to trust our own creativity in the face of these two facts.

**Thesis Structure:**

In the first chapter of this thesis I investigate the representation of communitas as it has appeared in our modern conceptions of community. This involves a brief consideration of the etymology of community and a reappraisal of the familiar and persistent dichotomy of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Within the sociology of community there have been other instances where the affective relationship of communitas has been noted but differently named. This leads to a consideration of Durkheim’s *collective effervescence* and Schmalenbach’s notion of the *Bund*.

The second part of the first chapter considers how the sense of belonging and connection experienced in communitas are part of the *symbol* of community. Cohen’s (1985) work is an important starting point for any consideration of community as a symbol. I refer to his earlier ideas on boundary, as well as his later revision to these ideas, to argue that the resilience of a community requires some form of symbolic work by its members. The chapter concludes with a reference to Brent’s (2004) argument that although community may function as a symbol of unrealisable desire, it remains a useful *illusion* around which we may organise ourselves.

The second chapter of the thesis explores the nature of communitas and liminality in more detail, with particular attention given to the influence provided by the work of Victor Turner. Turner’s original work dealt with a community’s management of conflict. To describe conflict in a way which was not constrained by a view that saw every aspect of
a society as part of a persistent, essentially unchanging structure, Turner invented a new term; social drama. This concept is revisited to provide a context for Turner’s thought on liminality.

I follow Turner’s suggestion that liminality has a function and is a form of ritual activity. This ritual activity is characterised by both communitas and an emphasis upon reflexivity, of the kind that echoes the symbolic activity that I have discussed earlier in chapter one. I detail Turner’s arrival at a modern form of liminality, which he called the liminoid. Turner noted that the individual experience of communitas in liminoid events bore striking similarities to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow; this latter concept I am taking to be a description of skilful engagement with a task. It is this observation that allows me to connect all my prior discussion on establishing the presence, nature and function of communitas to the question that I want to address in this thesis: How does an individual respond constructively to the demands that liminality and communitas places upon him or her?

In the final chapter I answer this question by proposing that Schön’s (1983; 1987) discussion on the nature of reflective practice provides important indications as to how one may deal with situations characterised by indeterminacy, of which liminal space is one example. The normalisation of Schön’s notion of reflective practice tended to turn it into a technology of its own. This tendency has removed the subtlety that I am reading into his core notion of reflection-in-action, which has characteristics that intimately link it with the ideas of flow and reflexivity that I have already established as distinctive to communitas and liminality.

I provide a synopsis of Schön’s argument concerning the limits that ‘technical rationality’ imposes upon skilful practice. I explore the conclusions that his earlier work with Argyris on ‘theories of action’ provide on the importance of a reflexive attitude. I
consider that these conclusions are implicit in Schön’s main statement on reflective practice and need to be considered if a more nuanced understanding of reflection-in-action is to be arrived at. Given this reading of reflection-in-action I state why I consider it an apt skill with which to meet the demands of liminality; it also provides me with some potential responses to the more typical critiques that Schön’s work on reflective practice has attracted.