

**The Demands of Liminality:
Community, Communitas, and Reflexivity**

Richard Beavitt

This thesis is presented for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

in Community Development with Honours

School of Social Sciences and Humanities

Murdoch University

2012

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.

.....

.....

Richard Beavitt

Date

Copyright Acknowledgment

I acknowledge that a copy of this thesis will be held at the Murdoch University Library.

I understand that, under the provisions of s51.2 of the Copyright Act 1968, all or part of this thesis may be copied without infringement of copyright where such a reproduction is for the purposes of study and research.

This statement does not signal any transfer of copyright away from the author.

Signed:

Full Name of Degree:

Thesis Title:

.....

.....

.....

Author:

Year:

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.

Acknowledgments

I should like to thank several people who have provided encouragement, guidance, useful ideas and criticism during the writing of this honours thesis.

My supervisor, Dr Dave Palmer, whose enthusiasm for the value of my thinking has been a welcome encouragement throughout my degree, and whose guidance during my honours year has been invaluable.

Dr Yvonne Haigh and Dr Ian Cook were both involved in the earlier aspects of my research on liminality and reflective practice for this thesis. Without their input I would have struggled to manage the task before me.

Ranald Allan for pointing me in the direction of Schön; Gary Williams and Allan Rudner for leading me toward some moments of reflection-in-action that were life changing.

My editing 'crew'; Meriel, Geoff, and Annie!

None of this would have been possible without the space and opportunity that my wife Annie has created for me to complete this thesis, so my most significant thanks, as ever, will go to her...

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Copyright Acknowledgement	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Thesis Structure.....	3
Chapter 1: Communitas or Community?	6
Communitas: The Etymological root of Community.....	7
Belonging	9
Community and Society: An Enduring Dichotomy	11
Schmalenbach: <i>Bund</i> /Communion.....	14
Durkheim: Collective Effervescence	16
Borders and Symbols: Cohen.....	19
Communitas and Symbolic Activity	21
Community as a Useful Illusion.....	24
Chapter Summary.....	27
Chapter 2:.....	28
A Processual Perspective: Culture and Structure.....	29
Social Drama: The Process of Conflict.....	31
An Example: Yonaida.....	33
Liminality: Van Gennep & Rites of Passage	35
Reflexivity.....	38
Communitas	40
Indeterminacy: Structure and Anti-Structure	41
Ritual Revised	43
Postmodern Liminality: The Liminoid	45
Chapter Summary.....	47
Communitas and Flow	49

Chapter 3: Reflective Practice	50
“The Reflective Practitioner”: Other Forms of Knowing	53
Technical Rationality and the Crisis within	
Professional Practice.....	54
Problem Framing & Improvisation	57
‘Theories-in-Use’: The Beginnings of Schön’s	
Reflective Practice	59
Single and Double Loop Learning:	
Types I /II ‘Theories of Use’	61
Knowing-in-Action & Reflection-in-Action.....	64
Reflective Practice: A Composite	66
A Reflective Practicum	67
Critical Responses to Schön	68
Reflexivity	69
Kinds of ‘Knowing’	70
Relationship	71
Chapter Summary	72
Conclusion	75
Appendices	77
References	79

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.