



# Book Review of Inside Mathforum.org: Analysis of an Internet-Based Education Community

JOSE HERIBERTO PONCE 

**BOOK REVIEW**



## ABSTRACT

*Inside Mathforum.org: Analysis of an Internet-Based Education Community*, Wesley Shumar, Cambridge University Press, September 7, 2017, 1st Edition, 204 pages, ISBN: 9781108518345 (e-book).

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Technology is ubiquitous in today's world, but this did not happen overnight. Rather, it has evolved throughout the years. The Math Forum, an online community that fostered mathematical knowledge and brought people together to do math, remained resilient from 1997 until its disbandment in the same year this book was published. During these years, its growth was directly proportional to that of the internet and the concept of online spaces. Shumar, an anthropologist, is not only the author of this ethnography, but was also an active collaborator of the forum. He describes the online community's cultural, psychological, and philosophical aspects. He goes deep *Inside Mathforum.org* indeed.

The main audience for this book is math teachers at all levels of education. Shumar begins by explaining the anthropological view of ethnographies, particularly in those of online communities. He considers his book as part of a series of ethnographies done on a variety of online educational groups. The goals listed for this monograph are (1) "situate the Math Forum within the broader structural context of changes going on in the US economy, and especially the internet economy", (2) "look at the contributions the Math Forum has made to math education", and (3) "look at the contribution the Math Forum has made to thinking about how to use the internet and digital technology for learning" (pp. 3–4).

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Most chapters in this book begin with an introduction that summarizes previous chapters while also providing any necessary background information. Each then culminates in with a summary that closes with a preview of the ensuing chapter. Each chapter contains several sections and subsections.

Shumar presents relevant theories related to learning and education and explains why he chooses an ethnography to write about the Math Forum. The author seeks to provide insight into three main questions: (1) Who are the Math Forum? (2) What is the Math Forum? And (3) How does it work? The book took many years to write to have extensive evidence on how the forum identifies as a community with culture. Shumar explains his role as an anthropologist with an outside view, but reveals the two-way influence between his book and math education. Shumar describes who is present, and how they are present. This raises the question: How is the author's perspective valid considering the diversity of these spaces? He may answer this question by describing himself as both an outsider and an insider, for many readers this could be considered biased.

The history of the forum is presented as a combination of its different housing locations, the projects that developed within it, and its story. The Math Forum emerged as a free resource and intended to continue being one indefinitely, but it had effects on the educational economy. The Math Forum was all about math—doing problems, talking and thinking about math, and "[changing] the culture of fear and avoidance with [math]" (p. 14). It is also about staff meeting to build ideas and discuss points of view to reach a consensus. Shumar explains the reification of the ideas that produce virtual objects and prompts the reader to think about the book itself as a reification. The forum's main objective was to find meaning through discourse, thinking, and practice—the forum's dialectic. One example of this is the development of rubrics for problems on the forum. Shumar criticizes the use of rubrics as opposed to the flow of free thinking. Yet, he mentions his collaboration in creating a rubric and justifies its use.

Mentoring was also central at the forum. The goal was to provide a scaffold (through other mentors and the use of technology) that can be taken away whenever the mentee was considered ready to become a mentor themselves. Another mentoring idea was the service of Noticing & Wondering (N&W) where teachers could think about what they do. They also came together to think about and give importance to what students were doing and thinking when solving problems. Shumar argues that the use of technology enhances N&W and discusses the implications this service had on the forum as a whole. The book presents great mentoring ideas, however, there is no clear connection to what is done in the classroom or if teachers ever reified any ideas in their teaching practices.

The forum as a space on the internet is constantly transforming itself. This transformation helps to shape the forum as a place of interaction. Shumar sees the Math Forum as a “third space” (away from home and work) for math. In this space, resources (that promote higher thinking) may persist for generations. However, unlimited space may be limited by external constraints, like the lack of support. The forum showed to be an affinity space more than just a community of practice: a place where teachers could share interests and goals. Anyone, regardless of background, gender, or race, could participate in this great place of inclusion. As the community shapes individuals, their identities shape the forum. People connect with other people and with objects in the forum and reflect on these interactions. Math education in our schools is more concerned with students passing tests and does not provide a space to address identity issues.

Shumar praises the forum’s potential, resilience, and impact on learning. It makes us wonder if he knew of the forum’s disbandment happening soon after writing the book. He refers to the forum as an entrepreneurial organization. As such, it moved to different locations looking for the right place to become a sustainable (and eventually profitable) organization. The author summarizes what the Math Forum has to offer for the future and hails it as an example for future online spaces. He makes it seem like the whole history of the forum had the purpose to bring it to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) to be the best it could be. However, higher demand did not mean a higher economic status for the forum, on the contrary, it became more difficult to support it monetarily.

## OVERALL IMPRESSION AND RELEVANCE TO THE FIELD OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

Shumar wrote this book as an anthropologist and a Math Forum collaborator. Immersed in the field of math education, he attempts to produce a pure ethnography of the forum as a community with culture. He became one of them in order to write about them. The reader may wonder where the author draws the line between criticism and praise. For the most part, the author presents the forum as an online breakthrough in math education. The book turns into a eulogy given the fact that the Math Forum is no longer.

Nevertheless, in its active years, the Math Forum evolved into the great resource for teachers it came to be. Especially, in the field of online education in which resources could be directly utilized. It spawned other communities of teachers and students that got together to do and talk about math. It seems the forum did all it could without being repetitive and outdated. Its legacy lives on in the archives now housed by the NCTM and, even though the future is uncertain, a new, better, and self-sustaining Math Forum is a latent possibility for math education in an ever-changing digital world.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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