

ONLINE PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC LEARNING COMMUNITIES Faculty Perspectives

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This study examines faculty perceptions of creating learning communities at a virtual university. Through online focus groups with 18 participants, 3 themes emerged: institutional-level community building as creating a learning culture; instructor-level community building as creating respectful interaction; and learner-level community building as creating positive interdependence. The faculty see themselves as taking on various roles to facilitate community, including being a facilitator, teacher, mentor, and guide; modeling professional behavior; and sharing experience.

In online learning environments, a sense of community supports student retention and success at both the course and program levels (Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009; Glomb, Midenhall, Mason, & Salzberg, 2009; Ivankova, & Stick, 2007; Rovai, Wighting, & Jing, 2005; Stein et al., 2007). The online university represents a special challenge to community building because the learners are physically brought together on a limited and irregular basis, if at all. It becomes the contacts with others that frame the sense of community for those involved. That is, when

the faculty and learners come together with an identical goal, the environment that is created will affect the way in which knowledge is created. At an online institution, there are contacts with support staff as well as with faculty and other learners in the course room. Each contact will influence the individual and his or her view of the academic community. The degree to which we establish a sense of community in the online course room is the focus of this research. This study explores community creation from the faculty perspective and gives voice to their views.

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 14(3), 2013, pp. 123–130
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ISSN 1528-3518
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ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities provide a way to envision e-learning classrooms. The connection between individuals and their learning community is a hallmark of a graduate academic institution (Beattie, 2002; Rovai, 2003; Thurston, 2005). Weak or no connection to the university community has ramifications for learner retention and referrals of prospective students (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). Therefore, every aspect of the university needs to foster connectedness as a way to build community (Bibeau, 2001). Connectedness is the degree to which people see themselves in relation to other people (R. M. Lee & Robbins, 1995) and organizations (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). Building those relationships through interactions between and among people is what defines community (Riel, 1996).

Many community-building strategies rely primarily on the efforts of course instructors. These include using task-based interactions to promote completion of assignments and socio-emotional interactions to facilitate relationships (Rovai, 2001), fostering a positive and collaborative culture (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004), using authentic assessment practices (Lee, Carter-Wells, Glaeser, Ivers, & Street, 2006), and mentoring and coaching learners to achieve group goals and promote learning (Gunawardena et al., 2006; Stein, Wanstreet, Slagle, Trinko, & Lutz, 2013). Few strategies call for systematic community building at “beyond-class” levels (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2009, p. 540).

While the literature emphasizes the importance of building online learning communities to support worthwhile learning experiences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), foster shared involvement (Palloff & Pratt, 2003), help learners develop online identities (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005), support knowledge construction (Moisey, Neu, & Cleveland-Innes, 2008), and become collectively wise (Gunawardena et al., 2006), the perspective of those faculty involved in building learning

communities is lacking (O'Neill, Scott, & Conboy, 2011). In light of the gap in faculty perspectives related to building online learning communities, this study investigated the following questions: What does it mean to create a community of learners at a virtual university? What is the culture of community for learning at this university? What is the role of faculty in creating a learning community? How do you project teaching, learning, and social presence to build community?

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

A qualitative descriptive approach was used in this study because it is compatible with focus groups (Webb & Kevern, 2001) and sought to produce a descriptive portrayal of group perceptions (Sandelowski, 2000), feelings, and thoughts about learning communities through predetermined, open-ended questions (Krueger, 1994). Data to answer the research questions were gathered through an asynchronous online focus group that spanned 4 weeks. The online focus group format was used because it encouraged the development of a shared understanding of the concept of community and encouraged the exploration of the concept by the participants.

Online focus groups have been shown to promote group interaction over multiple weeks (Kenny, 2005), provide a convenient way for participants to join group discussions (Moloney, Dietrich, Strickland, & Myerburg, 2003), and allow more time for reflection than face-to-face focus groups (Tates et al., 2009). From the perspective of the researcher, online focus groups automatically and accurately capture the discussion data without the need for transcription (Moloney et al., 2003) and are theoretically sound (Turney & Pocknee, 2005).

Population and Sample

All full-time and adjunct faculty at a large for-profit virtual university comprised the population for the study. After permission and

approval was obtained from the university's office of institutional research and the institutional review board, an e-mail invitation was sent to all faculty ($N = 1,551$). Of the 100 faculty who responded, 25 were randomly selected to be in the study. Of those, 18 participated, 10 of whom were female. Adjuncts represented approximately 85% of the sample. The sample is representative of the population in terms of gender and full-time/adjunct percentage.

Procedure

The online focus group was conducted on a discussion board in the university's course management system. Turney and Pocknee (2005) recommend using university learning management systems to conduct online focus groups to take advantage of existing, familiar infrastructure and university security and privacy procedures. A course shell for the 4-week focus group discussion was arranged, and all participants were enrolled. For ease of access, the focus group appeared on faculty home pages as a course lasting 4 weeks. The sessions were conducted in the discussion forum, and each week a new question appeared to prompt discussion. The participants stayed with the discussion for the week, but some continued in the previous week. Most faculty participated in the discussion two or more times per week. Names were not associated with postings, thus ensuring anonymity of respondents, unless they elected to self-identify.

The role of the researchers was to monitor the discussion and post only as needed to minimize misunderstandings (Moloney et al., 2003) and keep the discussion on target. The researchers were not otherwise members of the group responding to the weekly questions.

Following the focus group, two researchers carefully read all discussion transcripts independently and organized the data according to significant statements (Creswell, 2009). Codes were generated from which a description of themes emerged (Creswell, 2009). The

researchers discussed the themes and came to consensus.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

Three themes that reflect faculty perspectives of academic and professional community creation emerged from an analysis of the focus group transcripts. The themes relate to responsibility for community building at the institutional, instructor, and learner levels.

Institutional-Level Community Building: Creating a Learning Culture

Faculty perceived that the institution was responsible for creating a culture that fosters learning in academic and professional communities. Institutional efforts to facilitate academic learning communities include student support services and the course management system, which was seen as creating a foundation for community where learners and faculty come together "to communicate, share, and build knowledge" as well as creating a "shared purpose by the way we structure assignments." As one respondent noted,

In [our] course room, learners ... interact with each other formally through moderated discussion topics, and more informally through cyber cafes and telephone conversations and meetings among themselves. In some sense, the course room is already structured through its technology to create a basis for a learning community.

In addition to the technology that facilitates interaction and relationship-building, student support services were perceived as foundational to creating a learning community. As one respondent noted,

Taken together, the university's information for learners, faculty, mission statement, etc. [sic] help show how a community of learners can be created and expanded. Examples are the required tasks and available resources common to all learners (i.e., degree require-

ments, orientation to the course room, writing center, career center, advisors).

A number of studies tie institutional online support to learner satisfaction (Beaudoin, Kurtz, & Eden, 2009; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008), learner persistence (Joo, Joung, & Sim, 2011), and faculty motivation (Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009), but no study was found that suggests a relationship between institutional support and learning community creation.

Although the institution was praised for its efforts to promote academic learning communities, faculty reported shortcomings regarding institutional efforts to promote a professional learning community, particularly among adjuncts. Characterizing themselves as “commodities” or “an appendage,” adjuncts in this study “don’t feel community because it’s not encouraged.” As one respondent noted,

I don’t feel like I’m part of a faculty learning community. Adjuncts are rarely included in decision making; we rarely have meetings; and we rarely find out what is going on in the university, although there are assumptions made that we know ... it’s difficult to model community if one is not experiencing it.

Just as community building is considered a strategy to combat isolation among learners (Bibeau, 2001; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000), lack of community contributes to feelings of isolation among adjuncts, as one respondent noted:

I haven’t seen any evidence that [the university] wants us as full members of their culture with all the freedom of thought and conversation that goes with it. There is nice lip service—high levels of civility—but I’m not going to pretend that there is anything beyond this. That is fine; I know what it is. But I also know what it is not: a culture inclusive of adjunct faculty. I hope some day that they will see the value of pursuing this path. I will be the first one on it!

Devoting inadequate attention to faculty learning communities can have a detrimental effect on graduates. As Romsdahl and Hill (2012) suggest, student participation in online learning communities has implications for the local communities in which graduates live and work in terms of interest in and collaboration around regional issues. One respondent echoed those findings:

Not cultivating a culture for learners and for adjuncts, who are the backbone of the organization, has great implications for what our graduates take (and don’t take) to the communities and professions they enter. I would hope the [leaders of the institution] would be deeply concerned about this essential omission in their online education.

Instructor-level Community Building: Creating Respectful Interaction

Faculty perceived that community is developed through respectful interactions that promote learning. One faculty member noted that an “open, respectful environment for students to learn from each other [creates] a really great experience.” Group discussion and assignments helped learners develop shared values and norms, which led “more readily to self-disclosure and meaningful interaction.”

Faculty see themselves as taking on various roles in learning communities. Respondents noted:

The role of the faculty is to enable students to climb one step up to acquiring new skills and knowledge. The one step I most go for is the ability to critically assess and analyze something they have taken for granted or believed was “true” because it was written somewhere or they had always “known” it. I love it when a student begins to be a bit skeptical, and when he or she begins to question his or her assumptions and beliefs about anything. This is what I think good teachers do.

The role of faculty is to open minds to new ways of thinking. Then we have to help students articulate and evaluate ideas so they

can be shared, subjected to criticism, and built on, and give them some confidence to accept criticism, analyze their own thoughts, and expand their horizons.

The role of faculty in an online course should be mentor, facilitator, and guide. What I want to be able to do is to empower learners to take on the learning process and, together, to explore the content through deep dialogue.

I see the role of faculty as much more than being a guide, or facilitator, or cheerleader. Faculty are in the course room to share their expertise in teaching, research, and practice, and to model professional standards. They are also there to provide methods of learning that will help learners develop critical thinking and writing skills. These are not optional skill sets for graduate learners; they are standards of scholarship to be achieved.

One respondent perceived community building as a joint responsibility: “The institution and faculty can work together to create community. I think that online learning can help to create a culture of community if some intentional thought is put into the topic, and if instructors are provided with structures to facilitate the creation of such a culture.”

Learner-Level Community Building: Creating Positive Interdependence

Faculty perceived that learners had a role to play in building a learning community but that it may compete with individual interests. One faculty member noted the “natural distance” in online environments that may make the student’s individual needs “more central than the needs to be involved and interactive in class.” Another respondent noted the challenge of building community without buy-in from all learners:

A community suggests that we are all here for the greater good, which has not been my experience with learners. To have a community, you have to contribute to it because you want it to grow and develop, not because you want to get something from it—that’s exploi-

tation. Learners pay their tuition and want something for it. They have limited time and energy and are in the course room to complete a course, earn a grade, and eventually do that enough times to earn a degree.”

Other faculty perceived that learners had a role in fostering trust and interdependence among themselves and between learners and faculty. Their comments cite individual accountability and being academically ready to participate in a learning community as other factors that learners contributed to community building:

This community learns together. They have a responsibility for each other as learners and faculty. This culture does not value one learner over another; it promotes the individual uniqueness of each learner to develop a community of learners.

We are all learners all the time in our lives.

Learners have a mutual trust and depend on each other to produce positive outcomes for the good of the class.

Creating a community of learners means that each individual is doing their [sic] part to fulfill their [sic] obligations as a learner.

A similar finding related to positive interdependence and individual accountability was reported by O’Neill et al. (2011) in their Delphi study of faculty perceptions of collaborative online learning. However, faculty in the O’Neill et al. study perceived interdependence to be among the learners only and not between themselves as faculty and the learners.

One respondent observed that the university “has a diverse group of learners with a wide variation in academic readiness.” Learners need to be prepared academically as a “basic standard that needs to be addressed” in order for them to navigate learning communities. Academic readiness can be reinforced through tasks that promote positive interdependence via group roles and responsibilities; interaction related to task completion; individual account-

ability; social skills, including trust-building, communication, conflict-management, decision-making, and leadership skills; and group processing, or assessing the efficacy of the group (Strods, 2010).

COALESCING AS A COMMUNITY

The faculty functioning in a dynamic online community saw themselves as actively working to create an academic community of scholars in their courses but noted that it is often a difficult task. At the same time, they expressed concern about feeling part of the professional community of faculty and voiced concerns about the culture in which this occurs. This concern was primarily related to being adjunct faculty and not feeling as though they are part of a greater whole. This feeling of being disconnected from other faculty was seen as being outside of what occurs in individual courses.

Creating an academic learning community was perceived as encompassing the development of norms, having a shared purpose and shared values, and scaffolding knowledge. The faculty see themselves as taking on various roles to facilitate community, including being a facilitator, teacher, mentor, and guide; modeling professional behavior; and sharing experience. The faculty appear to be defining their role in terms of teaching presence as articulated by Anderson, Rourke, Archer, and Garrison (2001), which is a "significant determinant of ... sense of community" (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 163). Faculty perceive their role as significant to the building of community and of encouraging the learning of the students through the establishment of a community of learners. This supports Bernard et al.'s (2009) conclusion that designing interaction with the content, instructor, or peers into a course has a positive effect on student learning. The faculty saw themselves as actively working to create a community of scholars in their courses.

Both the institution and the faculty are focused on creating community among learners, but this study suggests that they have largely overlooked the importance of creating community among faculty. Anderson (2003) calls for teacher-teacher interaction to collaborate on research and evaluation and to support professional development and knowledge-building opportunities for instructors. In this study, adjunct instructors in particular expressed concern about not feeling part of the professional community of faculty and about the implications of that "essential omission" for learners in terms of their subsequent communities and professions. It should be noted that after this study was completed, the university made significant changes in the structure of the faculty. These changes mainly affected the number and role of full-time faculty. Community among faculty was not addressed by the changes. The university's strides in technology and student services that facilitate academic learning communities may be counterbalanced by this lack of attention to fostering professional communities of faculty.

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