Faculty Perspectives on Online Learning: The Instructor's Role in Creating Community

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Abstract

In this qualitative case study, the researcher followed up on a previous study on community in an online program. Focusing on faculty perspectives, findings suggest that while online students' sense of community was influenced by their interactions in class, in study groups, and at in-person social events, online faculty saw their role in cultivating community as limited to the classroom. Professional and personal obligations as well as the academic reward structure limited faculty engagement in the online community. Findings have implications for developing distance programs that support both student and faculty needs.

Keywords: online learning, community, faculty

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Over the past decade, universities have continued to expand their distance offerings. Nearly 30% of American college students have taken an online course (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Online programs have particularly grown at the graduate level, with 26% of graduate students being enrolled in an online program (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Despite progress in enrollment, online programs face challenges in engaging and retaining students. Helping students cultivate a sense of community can help promote student success in an online program (Rovai, 2003; Tirrell & Quick, 2012). Given that instructors play a vital role in students' experiences, this paper explores instructors' perspectives on cultivating community in an online program. The findings have important implications for researchers and practitioners in online environments.

Review of Literature

Researchers have long held that the nature of interactions in learning environments impacts students' sense of closeness and community. Social presence theory emerged to explain interpersonal connections within virtual environments (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence theory suggests that the ways individuals interact in computer-mediated contexts impacts their degree of closeness. For example, when individuals respond quickly and use written and textual cues to communicate intimacy, feelings of connection are increased in a virtual environment (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Researchers have identified several strategies to

increase social presence, including incorporating welcoming messages into the start of a course, encouraging the use of humor, developing profiles to share information about individuals, and using emoticons to express emotion (Aragon, 2007; Tu, 2000).

When social presence is high, a sense of community can form within the learning environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Communities are characterized by feelings of membership, belonging, support, and trust (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In a learning community, students develop these feelings through collaborative work in a trusting environment (Rovai, 2003). Drawing mostly on data from students, scholars have begun to explore how community is constructed in online programs. Rovai (2007) writes that instructors can structure courses in ways that help students connect. In a review of the literature on the topic, Rovai (2007) found that students were more likely to develop community in classrooms where they could engage whole-group and small-group discussion. In a case study of 20 instructors, Waycott, Sheard, Thompson, and Clerehan (2013) found that peer knowledge-sharing activities, including blogs and discussion boards, can also help students develop a sense of closeness with peers in virtual environments. Practitioners are also increasingly experimenting with a number of different modes of communication, including breakout groups, class presentations, and the flipped classroom, to encourage interactivity in distance classes (Knapp, 2018). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) found that courses that were interactive and highly structured contributed to distance learners' sense of community.

The structure of an academic program as a whole can contribute to students' sense of community as well. In a multiyear study of online students, Conrad (2005) found that cohorts were important for distance learners. In a cohort, students can develop a sense of belonging within a supportive group (Berry, 2017b; Conrad, 2005). While students' relationships within this group may change, the cohort provides a powerful frame for community (Berry, 2017a). Outside of the classroom, faculty, program administrators, and student affairs staff can design a range of cocurricular programs to help students develop social relationships (Crawley, 2012). Orientations can provide online students with vital information about the culture and expectations of the academic program (Berry, 2018). Additionally, orientation can provide an opportunity for online students to learn more about their peers (Berry, 2018). Brindley (2014) writes that while student support services for distance learners are "essential," they are also "evolving," as programs continue to learn how to leverage technology to provide academic, psychological, and social support to distance learners. Bailey and Brown (2016) identify a range of areas for online programs to consider in strengthening their student support services, including counseling and disability support.

Despite the importance of community to online students' engagement, there is a dearth of research on faculty perceptions of community in online programs. In a survey of 344 faculty at land-grant and research-intensive institutions, Bolliger, Shepherd, and Bryant (2019) discovered that faculty found students' sense of community to be key to engagement and satisfaction in online programs. Eighty-eight percent strongly agreed that community was important. Sixty-six percent said community extends beyond classes. However, only 37% said that there was a system in place at their institution to help online students build community. Given that faculty are the primary point of contact for online students, learning more about their perceptions of online community is critical for supporting online students' success.

Research Question

This study was driven by the following research question: According to faculty in one online doctoral program, what role should instructors play in helping online students develop a sense of community?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework informing this study is White and Nonnamaker's (2008) doctoral student community of influence model. The authors argue that for doctoral students, academic community can be understood as occurring in five overlapping spheres—the discipline or professional field, the institution, the department, the lab, and the advisor–student relationship (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). While students can experience community in a range of spaces, their sense of community is based significantly on where they are in relationship to any of the aforementioned groups. In a previous study, I used White and Nonnamaker's (2008) theoretical framework to identify the spaces where online doctoral students experience community (Berry, 2017b). In that study, students attributed their sense of community to interactions in four spaces— the cohort, the classroom, small groups of friends in the program, and peer study groups.

Understanding community as something that can occur as multiple spheres is important. First, it moves researchers away from conceptualizing online community as simply present or absent. By pushing away from understanding community as a binary, researchers are able to see the nuance within community. Second, understanding the overlapping spheres of community allows for a more thorough exploration of where community occurs. Research on online learning has tended to focus on community as a classroom-based phenomenon (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Using a framework that focuses on connectedness in multiple spaces creates a possibility for understanding online communities in new ways.

Setting

The study took place at an online doctorate program at a large Research 1 institution, which will be referred to by the pseudonym "University of the West." Over the past 8 years, the institution has received a number of academic and industry awards for its well-ranked, large online masters and doctoral programs. The courses were delivered in a synchronous format. Using Web conference software, students met weekly in a virtual classroom, where they could see their peers and each other. Students were also required to attend an in-person orientation at the start of each school year.

Methods

This project was a qualitative case study, where the case was the online doctoral program. Case study methods are appropriate for descriptive analyses of unique contexts (Merriam, 2009). Many studies of online programs rely on survey data (Berry, 2017a). In using qualitative methods, the researcher is able to paint a descriptive picture of the unique context of the online program. This study is a follow-up to a study on online students' sense of community. That study occurred in 2016, when the program was in its second year. In that study, I conducted 10 interviews with first-year students and 10 interviews with second-year students (Berry, 2017a). Through that study, I explored how online students defined and experienced community. The follow-up study took place in 2017. I interviewed faculty in the same online program. Thirteen instructors were interviewed, including six full-time and seven adjunct faculty. Faculty interviewed had, on

average, 4.7 years of experience teaching in online programs. These faculty represent 25% of faculty teaching in the spring semester. The faculty interviews were semistructured, occurred by phone, and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews focused on three areas—definitions of community, faculty's role in community, and strategies for creating community.

Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted via phone, recorded using Google Voice, and transcribed via an online transcription service. To analyze the transcripts, I created a coding scheme aligned to the conceptual framework. The coding scheme included Rovai's (2003) definitions of community, McMillan and Chavis's (1986) aspects of community (i.e., membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection) and White and Nonnamaker's (2008) spheres of community (i.e., the discipline or professional field, the institution, the department, the lab, and the advisor–student relationship). The coding scheme also included sites identified as sources of community in previous research on online doctoral students—the cohort, the classroom, study groups, and extracurricular/in-person group meetings (Berry, 2017b). In the interviews with faculty, new codes emerged, including orientation and adjunct. I reanalyzed the data using these codes. After coding the data with theoretical and emergent codes, the case study was produced.

In developing this case study, it was important to attend to issues of trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that trustworthiness in qualitative research can be achieved by attending to issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is achieved when researchers assess their perceived findings against their interpretations. In the coding process, I defined and operationalized my codes. As I coded, I tested for the extent to which coded data fit with defined codes. In that way, I increased credibility. Transferability refers to the extent to which the case can be transferred to other contexts. By creating thick description via participant quotes, readers and researchers can make judgements regarding transferability. Dependability refers to how the methods are clearly documented, so that they can be retraced. By providing the interview protocol in Appendix A, I have increased dependability. Confirmability occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Results

Cultivating Community—The Classroom

For faculty in the online program, the classroom was the most important site of community. It was the space where they had most of their interactions with students and the place where they felt most responsible for taking an active role in engaging the students, facilitating connections between peers, and providing social and emotional support for students. Jane, a part-time faculty member, focused on using the classroom as a space to develop community by cultivating a sense of belonging:

> I think that the instructor can play a pivotal part in that and I think their role is really important because I think you kind of establish that sense of belonging in your class. So, you have those two and a half hours with them each week. I think it is important to make students feel welcomed, like their perspectives and experiences are important and that they add value. I think that's incredibly important. I think you set the tone, as the instructor, for that, for their experience. Not only in your class, but moving forward, you want to set that

foundation for them. I think any time you're in education and you're creating this environment of learning and safety, you play a pivotal role in creating that community.

As Jane's quote illustrates, faculty felt that it was important to help students in the online program feel comfortable expressing themselves in the online class. Other faculty members were focused on using the classroom as a space where students could feel comfortable connecting with each other. Ashley, a part-time faculty member, saw the classroom as a space to develop a foundation for community. She hoped that, with her support, students would develop a sense of rapport that would develop throughout the program:

I have the students for one semester, but they are with each other for the entire three years together. I think my role is, to the best of my ability, help them to make connections with each other, and to see each other as resources that can be leveraged. My role is to help them see that as a cohort, they can make it through together and pull each other up when things get tough. I think that is a gift I can give my students. I think I do that through modeling and providing the space and structure for them to engage in those kinds of meaningful, reflective activities like peer review. Ideally it will become natural for them to connect and support each other, and they'll continue it without my structure.

Instructors saw their role as modeling peer support in the class, with the hopes that students would be more accustomed to interacting with each other inside and outside of class. Marty also felt that class activities, particularly discussions, could help students work together outside of the classroom:

I think it's incumbent upon the professor (in an online program) to provide those opportunities for students to get to know one another, to work together. As the facilitator, you have the ability to create groups and breakout rooms and discussion groups, yourself. I strategically group students together. I can tell pretty quickly who knows who really well. And I try to give them opportunities to work with others to build that sense of community, and to deepen their capacity as students but also as co-collaborators as well.

In the spirit of fostering community, faculty would promote formal and informal discussions around a variety of topics in the synchronous class sessions. While many discussions would focus squarely on course content, some discussions centered on students' personal and professional lives. However, some instructors felt that it was not always appropriate to use the classroom as a space for building community. Kara, a full-time faculty member, described it this way:

I think we just need to figure out ways to really maximize that time so that students do have the ability to connect. Because some students don't necessarily, even if they live really close together, they don't necessarily have the time to go together and hang out as if that was really good. But from a faculty perspective, it's hard to do that in a course. Because a course has content that needs to get covered and the most that we could do is create community by creating rapport, and by opening it up as a safe space for conversation and all of that. But I think the social interactions has to be done elsewhere, it can't be in classes.

However, at the same time, faculty noticed that when they were not intentional about helping students connect in the classroom, students were dissatisfied. Marie, a full-time faculty member, describes a time when she tried to reduce the social interaction in her class:

My first class with the students, I started by saying, "You all know each other because you've been in class together. I'm not going to ask you to bore each with your dissertation topics. What I'd like you do is write them in a chat for me so I know your questions and your data collection methods." And at the end of class, one of my students said, "I haven't been attending class on Thursday nights, so I'm not familiar with everybody in the room and I would have appreciated an opportunity for us to go around and introduce ourselves." So, I said, "my mistake." The following week I started by saying, "Let's go around the room and let's take a minute and introduce ourselves. And if you know each other, then say something that you might think that you don't know about somebody or that people might not know about you." My thought was that I didn't want to put them in the position of having to spend 25 minutes of our first class on something that they've done 1,000 times. However, students appreciated the chance to get to know more about their peers.

Kara and Marie's perspectives reflect the tensions faculty faced in building community in the online classroom. While it was important to use a variety of strategies to promote peer interaction, such as discussion groups, peer review, and informal discussions about students' personal and professional lives, faculty also had an obligation to teach the curriculum. Social interactions were important, but it was the students' responsibility to do the bulk of their relationship-building outside of class. Faculty were reluctant to cede too much time to community-building activities. Toward that end, some faculty in the online program sought to make connections with students apart from class hours. Javier, a part-time instructor, spoke out being available to students to discuss academic and professional concerns:

I make myself available to them for questions and ongoing concerns. They all have my mobile number. And I encourage them to call me whenever they have a question or they need talk about a schedule conflict or something like that. And many students do in fact call me. It's informal office hours. But I do also schedule office hours, specifically to address certain curricular challenges that students might be facing at specific points in the course, where I know that they are going to struggle or they have struggled. I can't say that I do much else.

While Michael, a full-time instructor, did not hold formal meetings with students, he did make it a point to connect students to people in his professional network:

I've had a couple students contact me, and one of them talked to me about educational technology. I had a student from Microsoft who had some questions for me. I had another student that asked me to do a training workshop for one of the big accounting companies. And then, occasionally, I will send emails to students if there's something that I discover out in the open market or the open world that I say, "Hey, this might be interesting to that student." But my communication with a student has been mostly within the confines of the class.

Michael and Javier's perspectives represent a general consensus online faculty had about building connections with students outside of class. While faculty were generally interested in connecting with students out of class, the ways in which they did so were highly unstructured and contingent on the needs and interests of students.

Fostering Community Outside of the Class—Orientation

One area where online faculty did engage with students in a structured way outside of class was at orientation. While the program was fully online, students were required to participate in a three-day, residential orientation before the start of each school year. The orientation was held on the main campus and included training on how to use the LMS, an overview of program requirements, and a group lunch and dinner. Administrators in the program strongly encouraged but did not require faculty to participate in the program.

Vanessa, an adjunct faculty member, had not participated in orientation, but said that she would do so if she could contribute positively to students' sense of community:

> I had just started at University of the West in January and they either had it around that time or shortly thereafter, but interestingly, one of the questions that I always ask the students is, "How can we improve the program? How can we improve this class?" And that's when we got into the discussion of, "We really want to connect with more people." And some of the students expressed a little bit of a disappointment because they even said, "Hey, we want to connect with professors as well," and there weren't many professors at our immersion center. And I thought, "Well, that's a missed opportunity," and I said, "I'm sorry. I'll be there next time." Even if it's on my dime, I'll be there, because these are my students. It's an opportunity for me to connect with them, and to again, be physically present to help connect them to each other.

Like many adjuncts in the program, Vanessa spent time and financial resources to travel to the main campus to attend orientation. For her, participating in the orientation provided an opportunity to support her students and was beneficial to her professional practice. However, other faculty were less eager about participating in orientation. Aaron, another adjunct in the program, said this:

> If it's not needed, then to be candid, I don't feel like I need to do it because I'm already putting in way, way more time into this than can be justified by the amount of pay I get. The benefit of teaching this class is, it really has nothing to do with the pay because it's so small. It has to do with my learning something and developing a new skill. I've got a job and I've got wife and two children and so if it's not really necessary for me to participate in this activity, then I'm likely to opt out of it.

For full-time faculty, particularly those with more responsibilities in the program, the orientation was an important opportunity for them to interact with students. Michael, a full-time faculty member and one of the course leads, was able to use the orientation to help students get familiar with the course:

> I was teaching one of the first-year courses. They basically spent the first part of the orientation with me. We had mini class sessions. And then we played games related to the course, and we debriefed them. I think that was a helpful thing because everybody got to know each other. In the evening we went out to dinners. I did not go, because I have an infant son, and you can't do dinners like that with a small kid.

Like Aaron, Michael had to contend with issues of work–life balance. Kara, a full-time faculty member, felt that such a balance was difficult for faculty across the board:

> From the faculty perspective, there are two opportunities every single semester to go and meet students in the program physically. But again, they're Thursday, Friday, Saturday,

for the most part those are the days that... Their social hour. Thursday night for dinner, Friday night for dinner. Friday, I think for lunch. Saturday for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I think those are the options. So faculty can go to those, but that's a weekend. And for a faculty member who's taught... Some Thursdays I can't go because I teach on a Thursday. But if I teach on a Thursday, it's very hard for me to convince my family that I need to go for a Friday, too, Friday night. So, I go to as many of those as I can because I know that it's important both as a faculty member but also to my students. But I can't go to every single orientation or activity every single semester. It's just too much, too much for me as a faculty member. And it isn't incentivized in a way that I think could encourage more faculty to go.

Kara also noted that participating in extracurricular activities was not a part of how she was evaluated or compensated. Therefore, it was hard to expect her to participate in these activities:

While it's important to engage with the students outside of class, it's hard. It's taxing on faculty. I would love it if we were somehow incentivized to go to the orientation because I think it would help students to hang out with each other as peers, but also to get hang out with faculty and to get to know faculty, too. If I'm teaching that semester, it is beneficial for me to go to the orientation. It's a nice way to see people in person and physically get to know them. I think that if you don't have to go, if you're not a Chair or you're not teaching, there isn't as much incentive to be there. But I know that students appreciate when faculty are there. So, I don't know what can be an incentive, but if there's a way for the program to incentivize faculty going besides, obviously, giving us free dinner.

Outside of the classroom, orientation was the space where most online faculty connected with students and sought to build community. However, not all faculty could participate in this extracurricular activity. Balancing a teaching load and personal commitments with work outside of the classroom was difficult. Further, this labor was not compensated, making it difficult for some faculty to justify. While faculty felt that extracurricular participation was important to faculty, time and compensation were barriers to doing so.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study explores faculty perceptions of their role in creating community in an online doctoral program. A core finding of this work is that faculty were not active in many of the spheres of influence that online doctoral students found to be important to their learning community. Whereas students felt that interactions in the cohort, the classroom, small friend groups, and at social events were important to their feelings of connection within the online program (Berry, 2017b), faculty were primarily active only in the classroom community. For their part, many faculty members interviewed were intentional about building rapport with students and helping them connect with each other in the classroom. Faculty employed a number of strategies to help online students connect. However, some faculty had mixed feelings about using class time to facilitate connections.

The study raises important questions about how community should be cultivated in an online program. While it is important to protect instructional time, some students may have a hard time remaining engaged without social support (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). Instructors have to be mindful of balancing students' academic needs with their desires for social support and interaction.

At the classroom level, instructors might consider using asynchronous tools to provide opportunities for students to get to know each other. Discussion boards and other tools can be used to promote peer interaction and information sharing without cutting into class time.

At the program level, institutions might develop more programming to help online students connect. In the previous study, students indicated that they took initiative to develop their own extracurricular programs. Students organized meetups, including a trip to the campus to attend a football game. However, such effort depends on student interest, skill, and capacity in coordinating events. Additionally, some students suggested that they would prefer that the program take a larger role in planning extracurricular activities. For their part, faculty, particularly in teaching-intensive positions, indicated that extracurricular involvement would be difficult for them. Findings suggest that support from a third source, such as a division of student affairs, would be important in helping support online students' in extracurricular engagement. For many institutions, this is an emerging area for student support, and there is widespread variation in how institutions support online students (Brindley, 2014; Fontaine & Cook, 2014). For some institutions, extracurricular support for online students is largely "uncharted territory" (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). However, data from this study suggests that institutions must take a more active role in learning about how student affairs divisions might support distance learners. Findings suggest that some online faculty do not have the bandwidth to attend, let alone plan, extracurricular programs. As faculty and students focus on delivering and receiving the curriculum, institutions must devote additional fiscal and human resources toward supporting online students.

As institutions increase their support for online students, they must build faculty capacity to engage outside of the classroom. Faculty involvement outside of the classroom, particularly in events like orientation, can help distance learners feel a greater sense of engagement and connection to the academic program (Berry, 2018). As institutions encourage online faculty to participate in events like orientation, it is important to acknowledge the barriers that faculty face in doing so. Time, distance, and lack of financial support all impair distance faculty's ability to participate in extracurricular programs. Institutions should take these factors into consideration and design extracurricular programs that meet both student and faculty needs.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study describes how faculty in one online doctoral program understood their role in cultivating students' sense of community. Faculty felt that their role was primarily to help students make connections to peers during class sessions. They used a number of strategies to do this, including allowing time for students to discuss the curriculum and share personal and professional updates. However, faculty also were reluctant to cede too much class time to social interaction. Some faculty took efforts to connect with students out of class, through office hours, but few had a clear, consistent method for interaction outside of the class. One space where some faculty were active was at the required three-day orientation for new students, which occurred annually. However, faculty experienced many barriers in participating in this event, including lack of time and personal demands. In an online program, faculty engagement with students can support retention. If programs want to strengthen the experience for distance learners, they would do well to consider how to support faculty in engaging with students outside of the classroom.

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