Creating community in online learning: A case study of the Open University UK.

1. ABSTRACT

Creating a sense of community in online teaching and learning has traditionally been a challenge for online teachers and learners, yet links between students having a sense of community and student retention have been strongly established. This paper takes four research projects from a single faculty within one of the largest and most established distance learning educators in the world, The Open University, to examine ways in which a single faculty is looking to create this sense of community, the focus of each of the projects, and how they feel that these interventions promote learner engagement and a concomitant sense of community. The paper begins by examining the notion of community in education and why it is seen to be important in relation to student success. It then examines how the approaches within the projects differ in focus, examining a) What aspects of community they were focused upon and why and b) Their implications for taking a faculty approach to forming an online community. The study concludes a faculty focused approach in a large longstanding distance learning institution, reveals the rich resource that institutional scholarship, carried out within a faculty specific context can yield. In so doing it highlights benefits for module design, tutoring and student retention in the future of online and distance education.

CREATING COMMUNITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR STUDENT LEARNING

A number of studies have established the link between student feelings of belonging , and retention rates in Higher Education [1]. Research into community in online learning has established that interaction fosters interpersonal connections between group members and the same time can help learners , 'feel their educational needs are being met.' [2]. The same researchers also found that feeling part of a community aided both perceived cognitive learning and persistence in asynchronous learning networks. [3]. Peels makes the link between feelings of community and students' increased exposure to learning materials [4], concluding that this is positive in terms of learner outcomes. Lapadat, argues that teachers play a considerable part in creation of feelings of inclusion in online communities, stating that the high visibility of the online teacher is strongly linked to enhanced student participation in discussions and group work, which in turn links to feelings of engagement and inclusion in learning communities [5]. Whatever the focus for research, links between feelings of inclusion and community are strongly linked to student satisfaction [6] and perceived learning [7, 8]. There is however, a paucity of evidence in terms of the benefits of taking a whole faculty approach to different elements of community building with students [9], although this approach is common in campus based research [see for example: 10].

In exploring the creation feelings of learner community and inclusion, some research makes the distinction between tasks –orientated or relationship orientated

participation and community [11]. In many cases, for example, the case of the Open University UK, separate online forums are created for each: For example, the Café forum is a place where students may be encouraged to socialise, post welcome messages and link up with others. Whereas particular forums are dedicated to academic discussion and may even be divided into threads that focus on particular assignments. However other researchers feel this to be an artificial dichotomy , for example Skulstad's study revealed that learners can use dialogue to achieve different purposes, a learner communicating on a module based forum can moderate their tone (which may otherwise have been critical), to enhance relationships whilst discussing study [12].Owens et al identify a number of variables that influence levels of interaction , identifying: 'cultural factors ; involvement of the tutor, tutor moderating skills, access to materials, levels of support, feedback access to others ideas , as well as insecurities about learning.'[13].

WHAT IS ONLINE COMMUNITY

There have been various definitions of what belonging to an online activity is : Rovai [3], argues that without the restrictions of physical proximity or geographical location , community becomes 'what people do together rather than 'where or through what means.' (P, 4). Lui et al's case study into perceptions of community in an online MBA course found that students felt a sense of security emanating from a strong sense of belonging to a learning community and perceived learning engagement, course satisfaction, and learning outcomes. However it also reported that online teachers 'have a weak awareness of online community and low value of its impact on learning, and that far more attention should be paid to it in terms of the learning design [7]. This is concerning in relation to the research on what Knight and Littleton term 'interthinking', the ability to create new ways of thinking about aspects of learning, through dialogue [14].

The community of inquiry model (figure 1) has been used a great deal to explain the effective conduct of online learning [15]. One of its most interesting uses in relation to community , was an investigation into what students felt to be missing in their online learning environments and experiences [16], and how the areas within the framework integrate to offer a complete learning experience. This, as the diagram reflects, also includes areas such as climate setting, supporting discourse (how discourses around teaching and learning support learner comfort and efficacy within the environment), and monitoring and regulating learning. This approach also aligns with Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's model of communities of practice [17, 18], which examines learner participation as an integrated and peripheral practice, in which the learner moves from novice to expert within the community. This model is also influential as it brings together both learning and identity in a constructivist framework. It has been criticised for its lack of appreciation of power and language, but nonetheless, is a useful way of thinking of community in the online world. It also allows for consideration of motivation and the ways in which identities are formed – or the converse – both aspects that are powerful in thinking of the formation of learning communities.
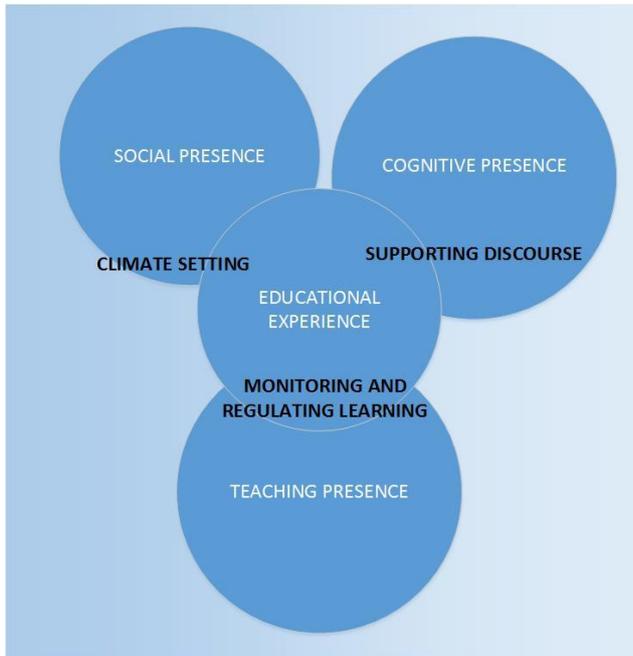
Figure 1 Community of Inquiry Model [15]

Yet in spite of Lave and Wenger's influence in the field, learner identity is a relatively neglected element in terms of its impact in full participation and integration in a learning community [19]. Not only in relation to the particular module/qualification being studied , but also in relation to the nascent professional identities that are being created around the subject being studied. Butcher argues that online students buy into student identities less than campus based students as they tend to be studying part time and have full or part time jobs [20] in Foley and Fribbance, 2018, p,174). This is influential in considering how students wish to engage with learning communities – in what capacity and to what end.

Studies linking identity to social learning have increased in number and prominence [21-23]. Although research on identity and learning is plentiful, how researchers construct identity is not so clear. In the broader social science research literature, two major conflicting theories of identity predominate, developmental (Erikson, 1959) and interactionist (Mead, 1934). However, research into online identity often uses the term identity without making clear what theory of identity is intended to be understood, leading to unnecessary confusion and disagreement. This paper adopts a socio-cultural view of identity formation and learning to examine how one faculty, the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is looking to create a sense of belonging and community within their learner population and the reasons that they offer for doing so. It also examines what form of community they take as their focus and the rationale behind this. [19]

METHOD

This paper is based on research projects submitted for the book, lead edited by the author of this paper: Creativity and Critique in Online Learning: Exploring and examining Innovations in online pedagogy. The book contains research projects into aspects of online pedagogy, carried out by Associate lecturers and Lecturers based in the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Open University UK. The Open University is one of the largest and most well established online learning institutions.' Since its launch in 1969 more than 2 million people have studied and achieved their learning goals with the organisation [24,p.25] in [25]. It is the largest provider for people with disabilities with 24,709 students studying in the period 2015-16. (ibid, 25). The four projects chosen for analysis were carried within the period 2016-18, and were chosen due to their focus on community building and for their mixed approaches, involving qualitative and quantitative analysis. FASS is one of the largest faculties in the university

Figure 2 Taken from [24]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The projects under scrutiny are : 1) Student Connections : Livestreaming and Creating Community via an annual student Conference [26]; 2) Facebook and Informal Learning [27] 3) Supporting Team teaching of Collaborative Activities in Online Forums: A Case study of a Large Scale Module [28].4)Making online teams work [29]. All four projects were examined and evaluated in terms of a) Their focus – what aspects of community they were focused upon and why b) Their implications for studies into online community and retention taking a single faculty approach. The results of the project analysis are outlined in table 1.

The first project 1) Student Connections : Livestreaming and Creating Community via an annual student Conference [26], examined how an annual online student conference creates a sense of community amongst students. The conference was fully online using an application called stadium live and integrated livestreamed video with chat function and interactive learning tools. Conference delegates came together with academics to discuss a range of topics relating to the social sciences

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(ibid, p, 175). 400 people attended over a five day period and over 1,200 people registered (p, 177). The live chat function had over 1800 entries per day and over 1,200 people registered.

The second project - Facebook and Informal Learning examined how informal learning via a faculty Facebook page promoted student perceptions of belonging to a learner community[27]. The third project -Supporting Team teaching of Collaborative Activities in Online Forums: A Case study of a Large Scale Module [28]- investigated the ways in which module team designers support collaborative learning in a large population online psychology module. While the fourth and final project :Making online teams work [29],examined how online teamwork affects student learning , as an embedded employability skill.

Study title and reference	Focus	Purpose of event	Implications for teaching and learning online	Implications for future research	Method
: 1) Student Connections : Livestreaming and Creating Community via an annual student Conference – Analysis from 2 years of the conference [26]	Participation (quantitative) and perceptions of participation (qualitative)	To enhance academic community for Social Science students at the Open University.	Creation of long term relationships between students and /or academics. Initial perceptions of breaking down feelings of isolation and distance between faculty and student. A real world way of discussing topics. Realisation that learning online was very different to prior learning experiences of students.	Very broad application – focus on social community and reduction of sense of distance of learner from institution. Instrumental in conditioning student perceptions of institution. No particular relevance to learning and retention other than possible links to employability (not investigated as part of the study)	Quantitative and qualitative
2) Facebook and Informal Learning [27]	Combat feelings of social isolation. To link academic material to real world issues.	To enhance feelings of belonging in a diverse and geograp	Raised important opportunity to discuss online tools such as FB and their effect. (metacognitive element)	Implications for student thoughts about the impact of online apps for relationship building. Further study into what impact	Qualitative analysis of postings. Quantitative analysis of 'likes.'

Study title and reference	Focus	Purpose of event	Implications for teaching and learning online	Implications for future research	Method
	To create a sense of belonging to an academic community. Reduce perceptual distance between course writers and students.	hically highly dispersed student group (p, 88). To take academic debate into learners online milieu (p,92) creating a sense of 'the real world ' in light of their academic studies	Combined academic dialogue with relationship building dialogue amongst students. Way to reduce perceptual distance between course writers and students- less impersonal.	the result of conversations has on study motivation and goals.	
3) Supporting Team teaching of Collaborative Activities in Online Forums: A Case study of a Large Scale Module [28]	Creating community of tutors that will actively enhance student learning.	Module design and review.	Organization and preparation for team teaching. Building cohesive teams for online teaching	Implications for tutor support and responsibility of course designers to build this into module design.	
4)Making online teams work [29].	Working together as an employability skill. Challenges in online group work. Investigation of Dysthe model [30].	Online psychology module with strong professional steer and high population of students	Importance of group dynamics and tutor facilitation of group dynamic for community building.	Professional development for tutors in online facilitation, supported by peer mentoring and peer support elements. Role of tutor in closing down discussion and	Qualitative.

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Study title and reference	Focus	Purpose of event	Implications for teaching and learning online	Implications for future research	Method
		(5000, p.196)(employability).		discouraging peer to peer interactions as well as more positive , community building interactions. Role of tutor perceptions in group formation and dynamic.	

Table 1 Projects and their focus on perceptions of community.

The four projects examined facets of belonging and learning within online communities, although they did not touch on the issue of identity, they do however offer valuable insights into practical aspects of module design, teaching, learning and what constitutes community in a large distance learning institution. As online teachers/academics, the teams were focused on two key areas: community building to engage learners and create social learning relationships between them and teachers, involved in both design and delivery of materials. Alongside this aspect the studies also focused on community building for collaborative work, leading to enhanced employability. Making online teams work (Kaye & Barrett, 2018) , revealed the role of the tutor is not quite so straightforward as may be suggested by some studies, and that leading online discussion is a careful balance between facilitating peer to peer discussion , whilst not intervening to the extent that it may be shut down. The study also revealed some resistance to collaborative work – even if linked to assessment. Yeh , [31], examined collaborative and meaningful participation behaviours , in relation to those that were not conducive to learning , and integrating these insights into online tutor development , may be one way to approach a difficult area. Certainly, in spite of the amount of research in forming online teams, [32]there is surprisingly little on how this knowledge can be used in staff development innovations.

Relationships between learners and the face of the institution, featured in both the Foley and Fribbance study, as well as the Callaghan and Fribbance work. Both innovations required a considerable amount of resource, but appeared to have some benefit on learner perceptions of community. In the case of the Foley and Fribbance student conference, learners reported forming important and long lasting relationships with fellow students, and engage with wider issues relating to their study. This was also a feature of the Facebook innovation. The face book innovation , specifically tapped into metacognitive areas of online learning , raising issues around the use of online media within learning [33]. Metacognition has been identified as a higher-order, executive process that monitors and coordinates other

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cognitive processes engaged during learning, such as recall, rehearsal, or problem solving" [34p,108]. It is defined as the activity of monitoring and controlling individual cognition: how aware the individual is about their cognitive processes and how they use them to learn and remember (Ormrod, 2004). Research into this area over the last 20 years suggests that learners with metacognitive awareness and ability are more successful in academic settings [35]. However , some research indicates that metacognition is only possible through deep rather than superficial discussion and learning , the type of learning that affects the identity [36, 37]. The strength of the facebook initiative appears to lie in core activity of bringing real world problems and issues, into the realm of academic theory, and in permitting the formation of online understandings of those issues in light of their studies. The creation of feelings of community and inclusion are key to encouragement of the development of such metacognitive awareness. Figure 2 illustrates how this progresses through the learner journey and the extent to which it is important for motivation and learner identity. The Facebook study can be viewed as both the development of learning community and a future resource for student to reflect on their own online interactions: An area that is not so prevalent in the literature into the creation of online community. As the researchers point out, the use of online media has considerable implications in terms of current concerns on privacy and safety of online data and its use- all topical in light of current debates on the power of social media and concerns around privacy.
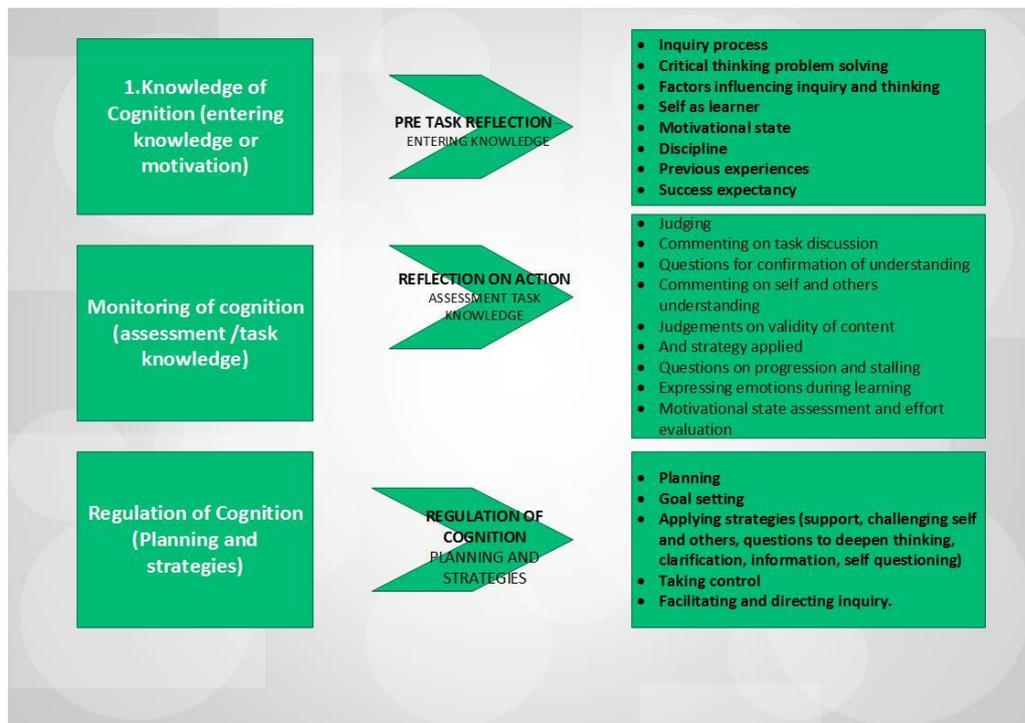

Figure 3 Metacognition inventory adapted from [35p,185]

The metacognitive aspect is also an important aspect within the work of Cuffe and McAvoy, in designing online modules which appreciate the need for learner engagement in the aspects featuring in figure 3 above. In terms of the module in question, the fact that it is a psychological module which has at its heart professional

reflection, may mean that modules in other subjects that draw less on this aspect, need to make a concerted effort to engage in this aspect; or at least carry out research into how metacognition links to feelings of community and participation in online discussions and tasks.

Researching online perceptions of community from a faculty perspective has a number of advantages, as this study has shown: It offers the opportunity to research the faculty as a system and modules as interrelated. It also illustrates how parts of the curriculum can be integrated with real life issues, outside of module specific work allowing researchers to examine how informal learning occurs, both within and outside of module specific forums. In addition, the faculty specific nature of the work permits focused examination of the ways in which integration occurs both in course (within the module space) and outside of course activity.

The study set out to examine how one faculty is investigating aspects of online community, what the focus of the studies are and what they imply for future research in this area. In so doing it has also outlined the importance of considering metacognitive aspects of learning in the creation of community and feelings of community and pointed to this area as fertile ground for future research in this area. In taking a single faculty in a large longstanding distance learning institution, it has revealed the rich resource that institutional scholarship, carried out within a faculty specific context can yield. In so doing it highlights benefits for module design, tutoring and student retention in the future of online and distance education.

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