

Examining the Tie That Binds: The Importance of Community to Student Success in Online Courses

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Abstract

More students are learning online than ever before, and while researchers have demonstrated that learning online can be as or more effective than learning onsite, there are challenges for students in online courses, including feelings of isolation. Intentionally planning for and supporting community in online courses can help overcome these challenges. In this essay, I argue for the importance of creating community online, draw from research to support my claims, and provide practical strategies for community building in online courses.

Keywords: online learning, online courses, community, higher education

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Although scholars considering the concept of success in higher education often focus on the individual, the context in which success occurs necessarily is a social one. That is, success in higher education happens within an academic community comprised of many people. Indeed, higher education revolves around community; it is part and parcel of academe. And community does more than simply provide the context for success. It is often required for it. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that community is important to student learning and success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Community provides students with a sense of identity and belonging. It allows students to share information and ideas with each other and to learn together. Thus, community enables a group of learners to meet shared goals. When it comes to needing community, students learning in online courses are no exception. Community is particularly relevant for student learning online, since we know that students taking online courses can feel isolated and alone which can interfere with academic success (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Rush, 2015). In this context, student success is the achievement of a desirable outcome, and in the literature on online courses, success often is defined as course completion and academic achievement, including improved grades and enhanced learning outcomes. For this reason, understanding and intentionally promoting community in online courses is critical to student success.

Descriptions of Community in Online Courses

Examining the definition and essential elements of community makes clear its importance to learning and by extension to learning in online courses. A community comprises a group of participants and their relationships, interactions, and collaborations (Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Shea et al., 2006). It involves a feeling of camaraderie among individuals who share common goals, interests, and experiences. Community members also typically share a desire to exchange ideas and information. The core elements of a community, generally, include membership, connection, influence, and needs fulfillment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The practical implementation of community in higher education highlights its importance to learning and student success. Indeed, higher education is replete with examples of communities that support each other and learning; for example, an academic research community is a group of people who work in higher education institutions and participate in teaching, research, and service. Similarly, a Community of Practice is a collection of individuals who perceive a problem and work together to solve it, or alternatively who simply share a passion and want to learn more about it (Wenger et al., 2002). In fact, the entire enterprise of higher education may be viewed as a community

(Braskamp et al., 2008). The core elements of a community in higher education include shared interests, shared activities, and shared repertoires (Wenger et al., 2002).

Research has demonstrated that students being in community together improves learning in higher education environments. Learning communities, which may include first year seminars and freshmen interest groups, common intellectual experiences, and living learning communities in which students are housed and take courses together, are an example. These communities can enhance cognitive skills and intellectual growth, educational attainment and persistence, and moral development (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). They also focus on the interaction of students and building of community. The core elements of a university learning community are learning and connectedness (Rovai, 2002a, 2002b).

When we think about community within a given course, particularly an online one, it is a more difficult concept to define, but it too is essential to student learning and success. Community in a course only occurs when members interact in a meaningful way that is intended to improve mutual understanding and lead to learning. In a classroom community, learners engage together in understanding each other, meaning making, and encouragement (Bickford & Wright, 2006). The core element from a classroom community is for members to learn with and from each other (Barkley & Major, 2020).

Research on Community and Learning Outcomes in Online Courses

While the idea of community likely resonates with most people, an important question is whether its presence, or lack thereof, is related to student success in online courses. Researchers have investigated this question. Many have relied on two main theories to frame their work: Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (COI) and Rovai's (2002a, 2002b) Classroom Community Scale. Studies within both areas support the conclusion that community is important for the success of online learners.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) describe the COI framework as a representation of learning that occurs within a community of interaction. The COI framework suggests that a meaningful and positive experience occurs among learners and instructors who engage teaching, social, and cognitive presence (Akyol et al., 2009; Garrison et al., 2000). The instructor establishes teaching presence through a range of instructional activities such as designing courses, offering direct instruction, and facilitating learner interactions (Shea et al., 2006; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). Social presence involves the teacher's and students' abilities to present themselves socially and emotionally and to establish purposeful relationships. According to the framework, this element occurs during course communication and is essential for promoting and maintaining relationships in the online course environment (Ryman et al., 2009).

Cognitive presence involves developing understanding through exchanging ideas and information and collaborating within a community (Garrison et al., 2000). Learners make and confirm meaning by engaging in sustained dialogue and communication and reflecting on their learning.

Researchers using this framework have documented the importance of community for online learning. Using the COI framework to investigate a five-week intensive online course, Lee and Huang (2018) examined whether offering extra time and creating increased opportunities for interaction would enhance perceptions of social presence. They also examined whether improved social presence, if it occurred, would be related to improved learning outcomes. The researchers discovered enhanced social presence, but not a resulting relationship between enhanced social presence and improved learning outcomes. On the other hand, Swan et al. (2012) investigated a teacher leader program at a small public university and found that designing a course around the COI framework improved student learning outcomes. More research on the COI framework is necessary to decisively know whether using this particular model of community improves learning outcomes, but the research that has been done indicates that community positively influences student engagement (Cobb, 2011), satisfaction (Bulu, 2012), participation (Richardson et al., 2015), and retention (Richardson et al., 2015). Another area of research related to community in online courses draws upon Rovai's (2002a, 2002b) Classroom Community Scale, a survey instrument designed to measure social community as well as learning community in online courses. According to Rovai (2002a, 2002b), social community embodies student feelings of trust, safety, and belonging. Learning community, however, involves the feeling that learners actively create knowledge and meaning within the community, that learners improve knowledge and understanding within the community, and that learner needs are satisfied (Rovai et al., 2004).

Research using this framework also indicates the importance of community to online learners. Rovai's (2002a, 2002b) research reveals the importance of students feeling like they belong and are connected to and accepted by others. In particular, when learners feel accepted, they are more willing to participate, share their ideas, and learn with others. Researchers using Rovai's scale have found that students reporting high levels of community in online courses feel less isolated, feel "burn out" less frequently, and persist at higher levels. They also report higher levels of learning and higher satisfaction with online courses (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2007; Ouzts, 2006; Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Rovai et al., 2004; Sadera et al., 2009; Shea, 2006).

Research on Factors That Influence Community

Because it is essential to student learning, promoting community in online courses is important. Researchers have discovered information about specific factors that support the promotion, development, and support of community in online courses. These

factors track closely with the COI framework and include factors that can be addressed by institutions, faculty, and students.

Institutions

While it is easy and correct to assume that much community building happens within the course itself, among faculty and students, researchers have documented the importance of academic culture in promoting and sustaining community in online courses. Moore and Fetzner (2019), for example, edited a special issue of the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* dedicated to case studies of institutions that have high course completion rates in online courses. Considering the cases, the authors concluded “In these institutions high success rates in online courses appear to be a product of institutional cultures that are committed to student success” (p. 6). Four key themes they identified across cases were access (in particular through ensuring accommodations and an inclusive academic and social community), faculty satisfaction (through ensuring that teaching online is not only professionally but also personally beneficial), learning effectiveness (ensuring comparable outcomes regardless of delivery mode), and student satisfaction (achieved by knowing students, seeking their feedback, and engaging in continuous improvement) and scale (achieving capacity enrollment).

Instructors

Clearly, instructors are key in building community in online courses. The research suggests that several factors related to instructors are important, including presence, communication and feedback, and relationship building.

Presence

Researchers have shown that the instructor is a key element for creating community in an online course (Delahunty et al., 2013). Students are exceedingly aware of the instructor in online courses, particularly of how “present” the instructor is (Miller, 2014). Shea et al. (2006) identified a relationship between students’ perceptions of an instructor’s teaching presence and their subsequent feelings of community in and satisfaction with their online courses. The researchers also discovered that instructor use of direct instruction contributes more to students’ understanding that they are a part of a community than either efforts in course design or content development for community.

Communication and Feedback

Researchers have found that one of the most important things that instructors can do is to provide clear and ongoing communication and regular feedback. Results from several studies have shown that students need prompt and regular feedback, ongoing suggestions for improvement, and dependable validation that they are doing well in the course (Boling et al., 2012; Stansfield et al., 2004). Researchers have also found

that clear communication from instructor to students, such as regular announcements, helps students understand that the instructor is engaged with the course; this feeling likewise encourages learners to engage, which is an essential component of a feeling of community (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2007).

Relationship Building

One study of effective teaching practices found that students suggested that effective instructors work to develop relationships and strive to create a positive online learning environment (Bailey & Card, 2009). The question of how to promote relationships online is an interesting one, but one option is through collaborative learning. Chatterjee and Correia (2020) found a relationship between using collaborative learning and a strong feeling of community. They also discovered that the relationship was even stronger when students had positive attitudes about collaborative learning.

Students

While instructors set the stage for community by the activities and tools they provide, students are essential actors. One of their key roles involves establishing social presence. Researchers have shown that interpersonal interactions are essential for development of community in online courses over time (Kreijns et al., 2011; Rovai, 2002a, 2002b; Rovai & Barnum, 2007; Swan, 2002, 2004). Social presence is linked to retention (Boston et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2009), perceived learning (Richardson et al., 2017), and academic performance (Boston et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2009).

Strategies for Promoting Community in Online Courses

Community requires more than simple communication; instead, it involves moving beyond communication to participation and full engagement. It can be a challenge to achieve in an online course, but as the research demonstrates, with effort, it can be promoted and sustained (Arbaguh, 2008; Liu et al., 2007; Shea & Bidjerrano, 2009; Wise et al., 2009). The process of community development requires involvement from many individuals. Indeed, individuals and groups across an institution can promote community formation and development in online courses. Following are suggestions for key stakeholders to help establish and support community for student success in online courses.

Suggestions for Institutional Leaders

Promote Institutional Learning

Institutional learning, or the process of changing behavior and improving performance of members of an institution through findings from assessment and research as well as through reflection, is important to support and sustain community in online courses

(Raspopovic et al., 2017). To create the conditions for community through the process of institutional learning, institutional leaders need to gather data, be open to feedback, and be willing to change. For this to happen, leaders need to be aware of best educational practices. The following are strategies administrators can use to frame institutional learning to build community in online courses:

- Identify existing online learning policies that should be adjusted or redrafted to support community.
- Define an ongoing improvement process for reflecting on policies and adjusting them as needed.
- Communicate policies with a broad group of stakeholders.

Prompt Institutional Decision Making and Ownership

Institutional decision making means the decision making or decision quality of an institution. Implied in the general definition is the sense that decisions should be made for the well-being of those at the institution. For good decisions to occur, clear and consistent leadership is essential (Yang & Cornelious, 2004). The following suggestions can support leaders who are making decisions about online programs so that they emphasize community:

- Identify individuals who value community and student well-being and put them in leadership roles.
- Develop a transparent process for decision making about online learning and community building that involves all appropriate stakeholders, including administrators and faculty members.
- Involve students by asking them to share information about what would improve their feelings of belonging and community in online courses.

Offer Professional Development

Many online instructors know the importance of promoting community in online courses, but expectations for asserting teacher presence, such as through constantly being online to interact with students, can be a challenge and can increase feelings of burnout (Bailey & Card, 2009; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). In addition, while research indicates that frequent communication, regular and meaningful interaction, and relationship building are essential for creating community within an online course, these elements of community building can be difficult to achieve while managing other time demands. Faculty development programs can help prepare faculty new to online learning for the expectations and with strategies for promoting community that are less time intensive for the instructor. Administrators should provide these programs to ensure successful online programs that have elements of community and regular interaction built in (Bailey & Card, 2009; Simpson, 2012). Consider the following options:

- Provide in-house training such as workshops or courses that include a focus on developing community.
- Invite outside speakers who can share information about the concept of community and suggestions for how to promote it.
- Offer individual consulting to help faculty create assignments and activities that can foster community.
- Provide faculty with time or financial support to redesign online courses to include community.
- Recognize excellence of faculty for outstanding courses and teaching in ways that signal commitment to online learning.

Be Involved

Institutional leaders can aim to personalize their marketing efforts, ensure that sufficient peers and coaches exist for students, offer informative orientations, ensure online help desks are available, and invest in appropriate technologies and support services.

Suggestions for Faculty

Faculty are the linchpin in creating community in online courses; research is clear on this point. Faculty who are teaching online may consider the following suggestions for creating community.

Be Present

Online course community starts with the instructor (Major, 2015). What this means in practice is that instructors should model good communication and citizenship in their courses. When students are comfortable with the instructor, and believe that the instructor is there, they are more comfortable showing up themselves, and participating and learning from and with each other. Some suggestions for instructors seeking to establish teacher presence include the following:

- Upload a photo and ask students to share their photos or avatars as well.
- Create an introduction page or video.
- Personalize the course wherever possible through efforts such as creating video announcements, module overviews, and specific video lectures.
- Set the course tone by using multiple communication tools, such as course announcements, discussion boards, and email.

Intentionally Present a Social Presence and Invite Students to Do the Same

For social presence to occur in an online course, both instructors and students should be present, and everyone involved should be aware of the others (Major, 2015). To create social presence in online courses, instructors may consider the following strategies:

- Create a video to introduce yourself and invite students do the same; these videos can be simple smart phone videos or even screencasts (which provide more privacy). The goal is simply to have everyone introduce themselves and share some brief introductory information about themselves.
- Structure in reason for students to visit the course site regularly, such as by having standing assignments and due dates.
- Let students share work that interests them and allow them to share their own perspectives (Major, 2015).

Create a Communication Plan

When teaching onsite, communication happens at the same time and in the same space. Online, communication happens over time and space. Before students communicate with each other, instructors need to create a supportive environment and provide guidance for the communication (Major, 2015). The following are suggestions:

- Create a set list of regular communications.
- Create a calendar of when communication with students will happen.
- Communicate the ways in which communication and information sharing will happen.
- Share information about when students should expect responses well in advance.
- Share information about how students can most efficiently communicate with each other, whether through email, a course discussion board, or text application such as Groupme.
- Develop guidelines of “netiquette” to share boundaries of communication.

Encourage Interaction

Onsite, interactions often happen based on geography, or who is sitting next to whom, but in an online course, it is essential to be intentional about student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction (Major, 2015). Interactions should be well-planned, meaningful, and relevant, and they should support a community of learners. Some suggestions include the following:

- Consider synchronous sessions, discussion boards, or text supports.
- Assign collaborative work, such as group projects, wikis, and peer teaching/editing activities. Be sure to build in individual accountability for each assignment, which requires each student to contribute something independently prior to working with a group.
- Form study groups or ask students to develop crowd-sourced notes, such as through Google Docs.
- Provide ways for student to accomplish interactions asynchronously; it can be difficult for them to find mutually beneficial times for synchronous interactions outside of regularly scheduled class time.

Build “Third Spaces”

Online courses can feel exceedingly task-oriented, lacking the informal interactions of an onsite classroom (Barkley & Major, 2020). They lack the hallway chats that happen before and after formal instruction. It can be beneficial to build in these spaces for interaction that is not content delivery, activity, or assessment. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide students with discussion threads that they manage, where they can talk to each other about their own interests or current events.
- Create a class social media page where students can contribute their own ideas.
- Attend virtual event together and offer time for discussion afterwards.

Intentionally creating opportunities for social interaction supports community.

Remind Students That They Are a Part of the Larger Institution

Students in online courses can feel isolated not only from their in-class peers but also from the wider campus community (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). It can boost a sense of community to help them stay abreast of the larger campus environment. A few suggestions for accomplishing this goal are:

- Post announcements about on-campus events.
- Offer extra credit attendance for attending any webinars or live-streamed events.
- Encourage learners to join organizations that are inclusive of distance students (and if none exist, start one).
- Tell students how to access institutional support services and resources provided to distance students.

Faculty members can, in a sense, serve as ambassadors for the larger community.

Suggestions for Students

Instructors can build supports for community, but ultimately, students are the ones who have to fully engage in order for community to happen. Establishing social presence is critical (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010). The following are suggestions for students who want to work to build social presence and community:

- Make affective connections with classmates. These connections require sharing emotions, feelings, and mood and can involve using humor (Rourke et al., 2001). Using emoticons or other tools to express meaning of communication beyond the text can be helpful (see Garrison et al., 2000; Yamada & Akiho, 2007).

- Make interactive connections to connect and respond to peers (Rourke et al., 2001). For example, respond to a discussion thread, reference other students' posts in your own, ask questions, and express appreciation of or agreement with a point another student makes.
- Make cohesive connections, which include maintaining a sense of group commitment (Rourke et al., 2001). Such connections can occur by using other students' names, engaging in small talk, or using preferred pronouns.

Conclusion

For community to form, online learners need intentionally designed environments and activities that encourage them to engage with each other and develop strong social relations (Delahunty et al., 2013). Online course environments designed to promote and foster community often prompt a high level of interaction among the instructor and students, encourage learners to take an active stance in their learning, and promote student collaboration in learning (Shea et al., 2006). Community is the tie that binds in online courses. It is essential for student success and learning. Given the importance of community, it is essential to intentionally create the conditions where community can form and develop.

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