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**Deep in the Hearts of Learners:
Insights into the Nature of Online Community**

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Abstract

Recent literature on online learning gives credence to the difficulty inherent in understanding the sense of online community. Quantitative studies especially have concluded with calls for deeper, more intensive explorations into what really happens in online learning environments. In this article the results of an interpretive study conducted among adult learners engaged in online study present an intensive and revealing look into learners' interaction with online community. Online learning is demanding and unforgiving; in feeling its relentless pull, learners construct their own lines of defense that allow them to complete their studies successfully while maintaining their independence and integrity.

Abstract

La documentation récente sur l'apprentissage en ligne ajoute foi à la difficulté inhérente à comprendre le sens de *communauté en ligne*. Des études quantitatives, en particulier, ont conclu sur la nécessité de mener des explorations plus approfondies et plus intenses sur ce qui se passe réellement dans les environnements d'apprentissage en ligne. Dans cet article les résultats d'une étude interprétative, menée auprès d'apprenants adultes engagés dans l'apprentissage en ligne, présentent une vision intensive et révélatrice sur l'interaction des apprenants avec la communauté en ligne. L'apprentissage en ligne est éprouvant et impitoyable. Les apprenants, en ressentant la pression incessante, construisent leurs propres barrières de défense ce qui leur permet de compléter leurs études avec succès tout en maintenant leur indépendance et leur intégrité.

Online learning has opened avenues for alternative modes of study by providing increased accessibility to previously disenfranchised learners. In this study, driven by my history as teacher, learner, and researcher, I explored the experiences of online learners through their stories of participation and through their decisions to participate in online learning activities. To hear how these decisions related to their sense of

community, I asked them: What types of relationships did you establish with your learning groups? How did you feel about your presence in this type of learning environment, and how did you contribute or respond to the conditions that shaped it? What shaped the development of your online community?

The resultant data provided insight into learning communities that builds on data from recent studies (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Vrasidas & Mclsaac, 2000). The findings of the study contribute to related understandings of what learners do in situations that require their interaction with and participation in online learning activities.

The Study

It has been pointed out that “people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized world view ... we are attracted to and shape research problems that match our personal view of seeing and understanding the world” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 9). As a constructivist researcher my personal view, tied to the social construction of knowledge through communication and social interaction, evokes Geertz’s reflections on how the questioning anthropological world makes sense of its observations, when he notes that

Inquiry calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 6)

Toward that end, and keeping in mind Bateson’s (1994) remark that “Life is not made up of separate pieces” (p. 108), this study explored learners’ online experiences through an interpretive process and attempted to make sense of those events through the reflective telling of their stories guided by the research question, What influences members’ contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities?

Methodology: Constructivist Research as Self-Reflexivity

The research question and methodology reflect Steier’s (1991) description of “self-reflexivity as social process” (p. 3) and the constructivist view that proposes “that learning environments should support multiple perspectives or interpretations of reality, knowledge construction, context-rich, experience-based activities” (Jonassen, 1992, p. 28). This approach supports Steier’s contention that the circularity of reflexivity—its echo, resonance, and responsive chord—hallmarks the “endlessly creative and interpretive” rhythms of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 14).

The participants. I examined the experiences of seven mid-life adult learners who were purposively selected because of their engagement in an undergraduate program delivered online. The selected participants were willing to express themselves by sharing their learning experiences with me. In preparation for lengthy interviews they jotted down their reflections during their online learning experiences. Although learners were at different places in their programs, they were members of the same cohort group, and at the time of the interviews several participants were enrolled in the same course, whereas others were enrolled in other courses. As learners told me stories of their learning through their recalled

experiences, their data resonated consistently as they accumulated, allowing me to construct more “structurally coherent and corroborating” interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 243). As learners were geographically dispersed, I traveled to interview them in their learning environments in order to enhance their comfort level during the interview process.

The program. The learners in this study were mature adult learners enrolled in a university outreach program with an adult education specialization. Using a cohort model where a group of learners approximately 20-28 strong began the program together in a course designated as the “starting point,” learners proceeded through the program together, with the exception of option courses. Unlike more stringent cohort models, new learners sometimes joined the established group. Courses were delivered using WebCT, a Web-based, text-based software that permitted asynchronous communication among learners and instructors. The program occasionally integrated synchronous chats into its courses, and the Web presence of the courses was supplemented in most cases by printed materials. Courses ran for a semester from January to April or from September to December.

Data collection and analysis. I used two primary sources to gather data for this study: interviews and field notes. I interviewed respondents once for 60-90 minutes using an informal, semistructured approach. Several of the participants had made notes as I had requested and referred to them as they spoke. Being present in their learning spaces added a dimension to my sense of them as learners. Quite often our conversations were punctuated or supported by their inclusion of papers, books, or demonstrating computer techniques or equipment. My own field notes of observations and reflections provided me with another source of data. I followed up with participants by sending them a fully transcribed copy of their interviews and later a copy of the displayed data chapter. As I analyzed the data, I was again in contact with participants by e-mail and telephone to ask for further reflection-on-reflection. Subsequent comments were included in the discussion of data.

The recursive process of sorting, categorizing, grouping, and analyzing the data was neither linear nor sequential, but rather continual, circular, and fluid (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). Following the constructivist view that “social interaction does not occur in neat, isolated units” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 130), I found it valuable continually to “bend back” on the data for renewed scrutiny and interpretation. Data that had informed one set of thematic discussions were revisited for interpretation and contributions to other thematic rubrics, which reinforced the connectedness of participants’ experiences.

Review of the Literature

Community, collaboration, and constructivism form the umbrella of social presence, defined as “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a *community of enquiry* [original italics]” (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999, p. 50). The review of relevant literature focuses on the discussion of community that frames the direction and conclusions of this article.

The Worlds of Community

The concept of community has been well accepted as integral to the building of sturdy online learning environments (Jonassen, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Stacey, 1999). A discussion of community, however, should distinguish its online use from its larger, virtual sense and also from the more traditional sense of the word.

Community. In the term *community*, historically a place-based concept with rural connotations, three elements are usually present either singly or in combination: (a) a collection of people with a particular social structure, (b) a sense of belonging or community “spirit,” and (c) a self-containment of sorts—once geographical (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1994). Over the years, however, and especially with

the advent of out-of-time, out-of-space virtual connectivity, community has become so increasingly difficult to define that our sense of community is often “maintained through ties, rather than through geographical proximity” (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997, p. 6) as like-minded groups of people gather together in the spirit of shared goals or galvanizing events. Community may have a physical dimension to it, but it may not.

Virtual community. Community, culture, communications: Nowhere is the tangled integration of these concepts more celebrated and revered than in the intellectual haberdashery of McLuhan. Although he did not live to experience virtual community—“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 9)—McLuhan’s global village became a metaphor for community. The Internet, its matrixed structure fostering fluidity among users, encourages and allows individuals who share similar interests to form community through exchanges based on their sense of shared purpose (Wallace, 1999).

Online learning community. Online learning situations are their own type of social aggregation (Jonassen, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Because learners’ sense of, and practice of, the concept of social presence underpins their contributions to the building of online community, attempts to separate online groups’ efforts to construct social knowledge from their collaborative social behaviours are difficult and often artificial (Fabro & Garrison, 1998; Stacey, 1999). At the same time, course designers attempt to “build” community through careful architecture in the belief that they are “supporting the natural development of relationships” (Schwier, 2001, p. 6). In this construction, learners are pushed, not pulled, into a community framework, somewhat like an arranged marriage. As a result, studies of online community indicate varying levels of both communitybuilding efforts and conversely of conscious restraint on the parts of learners in contributing to community (Brown, 2001). Studies that measure the types of community that are built among learners also differ in their findings according to the level of program being offered, the model of program delivery used, and the availability of face-to-face contact for learners (Brown, 2001; Bullen, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001).

Much of the community literature to date has concluded with calls for further investigation into the processes that characterize online community and social presence (Bullen, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998).

Results of the Study

This study asked learners to reflect on what conditions influenced their decisions to participate in online activities in their courses. A specific question asked them to consider the notion of community and what *building community* meant to them.

What Community Means

The word *community* proved difficult for learners to define clearly. Dawn thought that community referred to the “core group” of people who tended to turn up time and time again in the same courses. Instructors were “just people that come in and come out, and some of them don’t even really join.” For Dawn the extent of instructors’ “joining” learners’ corelike community was measured by their integrated, dialogic postings.

Those who “take all our postings and make one big posting ... really haven’t been part of the community at all. They’ve just kind of given the outline.”

Lisa defined community by looking relationally at function. For her the people she dealt with “on a daily basis, meaning, the group or the community, the instructor, the student participants” were her “direct community.” Those removed one level—

administrators, others in the university bureaucracy—formed her “indirect community.”

Steve approached the notion of community quantitatively. When asked in response to his comparison of one course with another about the spectrum of learners, “Did you find as much community there?” he replied numerically and indicated that attrition had claimed about 50% of the students in the course. Although not articulating clearly his sense of community, Steve still acknowledged that returning to a course where he was more familiar with the learners would be “like coming back home.” For him community was manifested in volumes of postings, and he had not felt comfortable learning with a group of students whom he assumed were “busier people, more professional” than he was and who “just posted when they had to.”

Rob articulated more clearly the sense of cohesiveness that Steve intuitively recognized as underpinning the character of the community. “It’s getting to know the other people in the group,” he said, and alluded to the tendency of the group to knit together, “when you start to recognize other people’s patterns and maybe a bit about them and a little bit of personality.” He also suggested that this process was accompanied by group members’ testing out of others in the group, “to see how far the group is prepared to go.”

Chris called on her medical background to fathom a definition of community. Initially, for her community meant “you’re *not* in a hospital! But I see a different context now. My community is my cohort.” In this group she described feelings of belonging and support, especially in hard times such as in periods of crisis and illness. Chris was happy to note that the group had supported group members’ crises. She had been able to anticipate who would respond to cries for help, and she believed that the ability to be able to cry in the privacy of one’s own home while online contributed to group members’ comfort in sharing, and responding to, each other’s expressed problems.

Stating overtly what seemed to be the case with most participants, Colleen admitted that community as it related to online activity meant nothing to her before she started her program. Once immersed in her program, she understood it “as a group of people going through the same thing together at about the same speed, some with lesser experience, some with more experience, [providing] incredible opportunities for networking.”

The Importance of Meeting Face to Face

Learners indicated that the opportunity to meet face to face with members of their class at a scheduled site visit had been valuable to them as a first step in building community. Steve traveled a long distance to attend a site visit:

It was right after Christmas and it was hard. There was [sic] only a few that came, and I was the only one from out of town. People were surprised that I came just for that, but it was important for me to get the sense of the people, and it’s no big deal to travel to do that.

The “sense of the people” that Steve gained from his site visit was the same sense that many learners held tightly to throughout their online experiences.

Colleen had also traveled to a site visit from afar, and she confirmed that

The visualization was so important ... to see who was who, and recognize that these people were all about the same age and working on the same issues that you were, and it was really good. So this group became a group.

Jon's appreciation of the value of the face-to-face visit contributed to his disappointment that his group's picture, taken at the site visit, had disappeared from the Web site. He was among several learners who remarked that a special bond had formed as a result of just one opportunity to meet face to face. "I have to tell you, the people I clicked with originally, that very first day, for the next little while, I talked to them a bit." Jon admitted that he didn't "feel any kinship with some of those new folks at all," referring to developing relationships online with students who had not been present at the site visit. In a last word, Jon described being between courses as being "kind of incommunicado ... it's a little bit like being bereft."

Building and Maintaining Community

The presence of consistent and meaningful community among online learners has been established in the constructivist view as key in sustaining the type of interactive exchange that in turn promotes both retention and knowledge-building (Bullen, 1998; Garrison & Archer, 2000; Gundawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). In probing participants' responses to the overarching research question, What influences learners' participation in online learning activities? I asked specific questions about learners' perceptions of, and efforts toward, the creation of online community. Although discussions usually began with participants' attempts to explain what community meant to them, their articulation of activities, emotions, histories, and events around what they perceived to be *building* community was richer than their ability to describe community itself.

Rob recounted a long story to illustrate how group members' personalities shone through the online medium. Working on a group project together, a colleague that he "had only just met in Edmonton" teased and joked with him: "pulling his leg" on a topic. Rob was known among his colleagues for his own sense of humor, and he laughed as he recalled the incident, indicating that he had found it quite funny. He discussed the place and purpose of a social forum on course Web sites, lamenting in the case of one particular course the obvious lack of such a forum:

We always had [a forum] before, and it didn't seem that it was something that was want [in this course] or any avenue for that kind of thing, so that kind of stilted things right off the top ... so everyone was guarded.

He compared this type of "stilted" ambience with the freer flow of socially oriented discussion in another course:

And it was really fun. You'd log on just to see what he'd say, and he'd say something in the social forum, the lounge forum, and you'd get a sense that everybody was having fun, and that certainly made it interesting in that respect, even the portions that had nothing to do with work. You just wanted to get on and talk.

Rob believed that this kind of activity was a good community builder. "You could really feel it." Who should take responsibility for creating a harmonious course? Many students thought that the instructor needed to take responsibility for initiating a sense of community. Steve's comments were representative of some of his colleagues when he reasoned that he believed it was the instructor's responsibility to "get it started," but after that it became a group process because "we're there as a group, we're colleagues. I think it's important that we all trust, that we talk to each other, we grow. The more we understand, the more we talk, the more we write." Steve was concerned about the possibility of "looking stupid" at first, posting messages to a group the members of which were still strangers to each other. For him the process of building community helped to lessen his reluctance to expose himself intellectually. A part of building community for Steve was the action of responding to group members' postings. Once a degree of momentum was established, Steve believed that instructors' presence could diminish without

harming the group.

Rob put responsibility for initiating community in the hands of the instructor and carefully stipulated that instructors who never “open themselves up or give the impression that it’s anything other than a purely academic exercise do affect the group.” Although he did not necessarily feel the instructor had to assume a leadership role, he did want to see instructional presence: “just to log on, and say something silly, or talk about something else, to get people to know that it’s OK to do that.”

Learners demonstrated thoughtfulness about the participative steps they took to assist in building community. Chris paid close attention to her colleagues’ first postings and began to form opinions of them from that point. Manifesting her self-described “Chatty Cathy” sensibilities, she recalled how she would “try to open up somehow, in a way, whatever—‘is there anybody out there?’—or try to make a bit of a joke, to open up that environment.” She noted that not everyone was like that and compared exploring the online personae of her colleagues to logging on to a virtual table in online games of bridge: “I can tell whether it’s going to be a friendly table or not.” She noted, however, that unlike in the bridge game, learners are not free to leave their online group members. “You have to work with them. They’re in the classroom whether I like them or not.”

Lisa also believed that everyone in the group shared in the responsibility for creating community. She likened online community-building to other types of community-building, with all members contributing to the best of their ability to foster a comfortable environment that would nurture the entire group and “doing whatever it takes to make it right.” She acknowledged the important guiding role of the “coordinator” whose job she saw as illuminating the way for those who “don’t know how” to construct community.

Some community-building efforts felt to some participants more like “bandwagon” types of actions. Several noted that “certain groups of people always responded to each other’s messages.” In some instances a rash of like-themed messages erupted and spilled out into esoteric specialty areas of which others had no knowledge. Dawn, Colleen, and Rob all provided concrete examples of such types of conversations, which occupied valuable space on the Web site and also took time to open, skim, and discard.

Quite deliberately learners took steps to establish the kind of safe and familiar environment where they could comfortably conduct the business of learning with each other. They were cognizant all the while of potential and real differences among themselves and of the possibility of conflict should the desired state not develop. As Lisa articulated, “We need to feel safe, to feel that ‘I am a part of this and I’m welcome here and whatever I say is of value too.’”

At the same time the thresholds of acceptance of living in the community were varied. “I take what I want from the community,” stated one learner.

If there are things that are not going to be of value to me, I respect their input and if I have time, I can go there and read it. I don’t respect people who are contributing to the community who are of no use to the community, so again, the side-chatter that is not doing anything for our community ... it’s wasting their time. I need to take out what I need to read.

Learners valued the sense of community that online learning environments offered for the safety, comfort, and trust that resulted from such environments (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Stacey, 1999). In this study, however, in the bonds of their community learners expressed concern about other learners’ social behaviors and were critical of others’ attempts to contribute, through “side-

chatter," for example, to the building of community.

Discussion

The participants in this study talked about the sense of community that underpinned, enveloped, or affected their presence in online courses. Their discussion of community colored the fabric of their learning experiences and ranged across several topic areas, each providing another lens through which to view and understand its impact.

All Communities Are Not Equal

Although an online community exists virtually, there are important differences between online classrooms and the rest of the Internet. The option of choice is not present in online learning, if we accept that withdrawing from courses is generally not regarded as a satisfactory conclusion to earnest learning commitments. Online learners must stand up and be counted. They must commit and be present. Unlike Internet users surfing the net or engaging in other types of fantastical, recreational activities (Turkle, 1995), there is no anonymity in online learning.

I would argue that the learners in this study found that their online classroom created a structured habitat that they accepted and to which they adapted. As educators can we "evolve" community "through nurturing conditions" (Schwier, 2001)? Do we believe that we can create "highly interactive, loosely-structured organizations with tightly knit relations based on personal persuasion and interdependence" (Kowach & Schwier, 1997, p. 2)? The learners in my study indicated far too much pragmatism to reflect this view.

As a medium, online learning was accepted by the learners in this study for what it could deliver to them and for them. Theirs was a remarkably practical and unromantic relationship, more akin to a contract. A part of this contract stipulated that users must invest many valuable hours in their learning endeavors and this study found no evidence to indicate that learners did not observe this part of the contract.

Their dedication in fact was superior. In the name of their studies, learners conquered balky technologies, endured broken connections, navigated stormy group work, and tolerated absentee instructors. On personal fronts, they transcended marital difficulties, illnesses, and family tragedies. They spent money on better equipment, on reams of paper, and on attending valued face-to-face visits with their group. They demonstrated organizational competence in gathering and compiling resources and printing materials from their courses. Their time management skills were tested and sharpened.

At the heart of it, they were stalwart participants, executing to the best of their ability and with grace and patience the tasks set before them. Community was constructed and maintained as a necessary tool for the completion of tasks. Their measured and calculated participation fed community as needed.

We Know Who You Are: The Effects of Increased Inhibition

In her examination of the psychology of the Internet, Wallace (1999) observed,

Research suggests that the degree of anonymity affects our behaviour in important ways and leads to disinhibition—a lowering of the normal social constraints on behaviour. It is not an all or nothing variable, especially on the Internet, but we feel more or less anonymous in different Internet locales, and this affects the way we act. (p. 9)

Going one step further, I would suggest that the combination of these factors—online learners' lack of anonymity, our societal inclination to be "nice" people, learners' prolonged commitment to a program of learning

- created in them an increased sense of inhibition. Although other literatures account for learners' demonstrations of respect and expressions of encouragement as being rungs on the ladder to building trust (Brown, 2001), learners in my study demonstrated a strong sense of compliance with tacit standards of respect and etiquette. In turn, this sense led to learners' concerted efforts to maintain equilibrium and harmony.

A number of circumstances specific to the learners in my study could account for these findings. Primary among them was the nature of their cohort-designed program and hence the length of time that they had already spent together in learning and the amount of time that they anticipated spending together in learning in the future. In this design a certain level of participation was required of them in order to succeed in their courses. Other studies differed from this study in areas that would affect this critical dynamic (Brown, 2001; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Studies that featured nonmandated participation or participation in noncredit courses, courses that were one-time online encounters, or studies that reflected opportunities for learners to participate with learners in other ways—most notably in face-to-face interactions—demonstrated outcomes that reflected these changed dynamics (Brown, 2001; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; McLean & Morrison, 2000).

Learners' Perceptions of Community

Online educators who understand that safe, nurturing environments are foremost in contributing to learners' happiness, sense of comfort, and ultimately rates of completion place the creation of community high on their list of priorities (Bullen, 1998; Conrad & Kanuka, 1999; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). In the style of Eliot's hollow men, however, I found that the notion of community that the learners in my study related to me was lacking. Viewed in the kindest light, learners did not first of all understand the concept of community. Many of them at the time of interviews were engaged in their third, fourth, or fifth courses, yet their collective ability to describe community in abstract terms was weak. Several quantified the concept, trying to capture the idea that community involved some aspect of relationships with others in their learning group that occurred because of the numbers of times that they exchanged messages.

Prolonged discussion about community during interviews evoked a few more comments, such as the simple but eloquent comparison of returning to a familiar group to "coming back home." The fact that learners had difficulty in putting words to a notion so central to online learning was especially surprising because the concept of community had been presented to and discussed with them during their face-to-face orientation.

One of the most valuable insights about community came from a post-interview exchange when a student commented, in a follow-up discussion,

When you first interviewed me, I had a whole different concept of what "community" meant in the context of online learning. Now I think it is safe to say that my cohort community has a culture, sort of an academic culture, feel we are in the same boat! It is so nice to get online and you know someone will be there. We are sort of a family.

The Functionality of Community

Learners' management of community in pragmatic and businesslike ways belied the pastoral and altruistic ways it has often been portrayed in the literature (Stacey, 1999; Yeoman, 1995). Two related notions come to mind. First, research conducted among distance learners completing undergraduate courses from an open institution using the correspondence model (Conrad, 1991) indicated that learners expressed strong appreciation of the institution's support services that were in place if they had needed them. However, none of the learners interviewed for that study believed that they needed to access those services, regardless of how they were progressing in their studies. In other words, devices constructed to provide avenues of support—like community—existed as good conceptual models, like safety nets, but were not well used. Similarly, Brown (2001) concluded that "community did not happen unless the participants wanted it to happen" (p. 31).

Second, recent research (Conrad, in press) indicated that learners just beginning online classes were not concerned with the existence or building of community with either other learners or the instructor. In this important get-started period, learners' major concerns were mastering the business of the course: understanding course demands on them, determining schedules and assignments, and making sure that they were in possession of all instructions and materials. In this study, although learners alluded to the creation of some sense of community and were able to discuss their contributions to and feelings about those parts of their course experiences, many still used the existence of community in measured and functional ways. In this regard they were not unlike the "first class" learners in their prioritizing of what was important to them in their first online sessions in a new course. And exhibiting the same "not for me, thanks" inclinations as the correspondence learners (Conrad, 1991), their reflections on the potential and existence of community tended toward the ideological.

Most of the participants in the study drew firm lines around what they would or would not tolerate in the creation and maintenance of community. "A little bit" of social talk, a little bit of digression, and some limited time both to express personal trauma and to respond to others' crises were tolerable to most. What was acceptable to some, however, was not acceptable to others. Susan, for example, did not feel that telling other students that she really appreciated their comments was information that needed to be posted online. "I think the very best way to deal with that is private e-mail," she commented. Other learners, however, believed that their supportive comments were reasonable additions to the social and motivational flow of the course.

Several learners—men and women alike—recounted stories that named *numbers* of messages and tied those numbers of postings directly to time spent online, time that they believed they could have better spent in other learning activities. In other words, *dealing* with community, and being part of it in participative ways, was deemed by many as inconvenient and taxing. Their resultant comments that attended to matters of community, therefore, were described by one participant as "duty" postings. These kinds of postings would elevate the levels of agreeing, sharing, commiserating, and other social affective behaviors that have been measured by transcript analysis procedures (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). This study questions both the true meaning of these kinds of postings and also the conclusions of some studies that "receiving such messages bolstered participants' self-confidence and raised their comfort level" (Brown, 2001, p. 29).

Social Community in the Cybercafé

Setting up a separate cyberspace for social chat was not considered by most of the learners in my study to be a solution for excessive online social chatting. Several learners indicated that it merely created another online place for them to have to visit. Overall, they believed that the creation of such social spaces was superfluous anyway because of the difficulty—in fact, the impossibility—of separating the extraneous chat introduced by some learners from the designated learning spaces.

Even those learners who felt that they were being polite or social or supportive to other group members by making jokes or posting messages of concern were impatient or critical of other learners' indulgences in similar behaviors. In the most pragmatic ways, learners explained these types of activities in terms that spoke to "community as tool"; that is, they adopted community interaction as a functional mechanism. I did not get the sense that most learners in my study interacted with community emotionally at the level of "deep connection" or shared character that would possibly sustain lasting relationships. This notion was supported by Brown (2001) whose study showed that interaction among learners ended when the distance course ended.

This being said, my study uncovered at least one case of a friendship that had developed between two learners, one of whom participated in my study. In post-interview discussion, this learner mused that she had not expected to have become such good friends with someone through the medium of an online course. As the friendship developed, however, it took shape offline; that is, although the personal bonding that characterized their friendship began in private e-mail in the course, it expanded to outside-the-course e-mail and to the telephone, resembling in its shape the normal development of friendship. Individuals of like aptitude, interests, background, and circumstance, through the vehicle of communication, "found persons towards whom they gravitated on a regular basis ... because of similarities in motivation, dedication, academic or personal background" (Brown, 2001, p. 29).

Examining this dynamic from the other side, I argue that learners' *lack* of embracing online community occurred in spite of, not because of, the course designer's best intentions. Like so many online programs of learning, the program that I studied had structured many community-building devices. The face-to-face orientation in this program, once mandated but in recent years reduced due to costs to being only "encouraged" and strongly suggested, was cited by most learners as having been fruitful and extremely important in the development of their sense of community. This two-day weekend activity comprised social interaction, icebreaker activities, numerous orientations, and some content delivery about both online learning and course curriculum. Pictures of learners were taken and later posted to the Web site. The online social venue was previewed, introduced, and explained. In spite of these efforts, however, learners' subsequent appreciation of that venue as a social nucleus was limited.

The Captivity of Community

In the program that I studied, learners' need for sustained, interactive online coexistence created in them feelings of conflict and anxiety. They told me, through their words and stories, that they designed their online behaviors to exhibit tolerance, etiquette, and gracefulness. In measured, rational ways, learners made citizenship gestures toward doing their respective parts in creating a pleasant learning community. Their participation in online learning activities contributed to building community judiciously. Their use of the medium was functional, organized, timed, and carefully evaluated. Its personality was manifest as much in silences and spaces as it was in conversation, the result of a "fishbowl" existence for the learners in my study. In this model of distance delivery in these online courses, there was no distance: you cannot run and you cannot hide.

The traditional types of bricks-and-mortar learning environments in which many of us were raised afforded a number of conditions that are not present online, not the least of which were hiding places that permitted the diffusion of tensions and negativities through coffee breaks, changes of pace, new topics, reshuffled groups, and interventions from instructors (or other watchful learners) who scanned the group for nonverbal clues among members. Together with mitigating conditions denoted by the physical presence of other class members and instructors, these options created a sense of porousness in face-to-face learning that does not exist in online learning, in spite of the deceptive façade of "distance."

One aspect of captivity that learners commented on was the archival nature of computer-mediated communication that they labeled “permanence.” Many of the learners in this study indicated a sense of wariness about what they committed in writing to course Web sites. The fact that their words were going into what were perceived to be public and permanent places gave them pause. They adapted to this caveat in several ways. Some constructed their responses slowly and deliberately in a wordprocessing file and then pasted them into the conferencing medium. At least one learner used this mechanism as a self-constraining time out, where he would “buy time” by expressing his thoughts in a Word document and then leaving the piece for a while. He would return to it later to see how he felt about it before deciding whether to post it.

Conclusion

This study focused on the dynamics of learners’ perceptions of online community. The creation of online community is key to the creation of a successful learning environment, serving to promote “human relationships, affirming and recognizing students’ input; providing opportunities for students to develop a sense of group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members to work together in a mutual cause” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 76).

In this article, drawing meaning from conversations with online learners, I emphasize that the midlife professionals in my study created an online community that was functional, time-driven, and carefully modulated; that there were differences in quality between one-time or shortterm online existences and ongoing programmatic experiences, and those differences were reflected in the nature of the community that formed, specifically as regards levels of tolerance and etiquette; and that even one face-to-face opportunity affected the nature of community that formed.

The reciprocal relationship between participation in online learning activities and the evolution of community centered the online course. Which came first? I suggest that participation in online learning activities exists *before* community, that it contributes to community, that it is the vehicle for maintaining community, and that it eventually becomes the measure of the health of community. Although learners recognized the importance of building a comfortable “learning home,” as is the case in many learning environments, the hearth fires of the virtual home were tended more faithfully by some than by others (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Do these findings compete with or contradict research that indicates that greater senses of community were likely to evolve in other Internet sectors? Although, for example, chat rooms flourish and bring strangers together for prolonged relationships (Gackenbach, 1998), and personal passions are often indulged by Web technology, I did not find this situation reflected by learners in the online learning environment in my study. I propose that the critical difference lies in the nature of the enterprise. Shared character and common purpose—the glue that holds community together and forges an entity where there was none—emanate from an inherent affinity to purpose, passion, or pursuit. In support of this notion, Wallace (1999) cited incidents among Internet users where “a superordinate goal important to large numbers of Internet users became a lightning rod that drew them together” (p. 109), using as a physical example a carload of elevator riders. Their “groupness” was not apparent until the car jerked to an unexpected halt between floors. From that moment on, a shared and immediate experience created a new social dynamic among them. The acquisition of learning did not appear for most of the learners in my study to have captured their imaginations in the same way for reasons similar to those given in Brown’s (2001) study.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study reflected the careful deliberations of a small group of

online learners. It would be useful to our understanding of online community to hear the experiences of more learners qualitatively. Learners in this study also indicated that their experiences of building and maintaining community changed over time. Understanding the character of community from its inception at the beginning of a program through to the end of the learners' association with that program would provide valuable insights into the ebb and flow of community strength and spirit.

Community is affected by myriad external factors that fall outside an institutional purview, but it is also altered by factors that fall within institutional control. The cohort structure, a model used in some distance delivery, offers intriguing variations on the shape of community. The conclusions of this study differ from those of other studies (Brown, 2001;

Curtis & Lawson, 2001) in part due to varying delivery models that did or did not include cohorts and face-to-face encounters. As with a finely tuned guitar when the change of one string produces a different sound, interwoven factors contributing to online learning community create a fluid and shifting dynamic. Future research outlined here would shape the ongoing scrutiny that keeps our knowledge base critically responsive, fresh, and applicable to responsible practice.

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