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Shifting Boundaries: Community in a Blended e-Learning Experience

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Abstract: This paper explores how learners construct and maintain community in a blended e-learning program in a graduate degree program. Findings suggest that individual's expectations influenced their perceptions of the value of community, learners actively gauged how much of themselves to share, and feelings of community were enhanced by mixing face-to-face and online interactions.

This study explores how the development of community can enhance learning within a blended approach to learning. Blended, or hybrid, learning often refers to a mix of face-to-face (F2F) and web-based learning components (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). It can also include a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning events, individual and collaborative activities, and several different online media within one e-learning course (Shank, 2004). Blended learning ostensibly leverages the advantages of both technology-based and F2F environments (Duhaney, 2004). By creating alternative learning spaces, it potentially increases and changes the interactions and relationships possible between participants in a virtual learning context. Online communities become part of this mix. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) highlight the re-positioning of the learner as a member of a learning community rather than an isolated island. Learning and community have long been a central theme in adult education (Hugo, 2002). Moreover, there is a growing body of research that articulates the pedagogical benefits of online learning communities (i.e., Afonso, 2006; Garrison, 2006).

However, learning communities and blended learning approaches are not without tensions. An increasing interest in these constructs, coupled with a lack of clarity, raise important questions for adult educators. Social learning theorists believe learning is enhanced by commitment to the collective good and when people engage in learning through and with others (Jonassen & Land, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Assumptions of a sociocultural learning perspective include: (a) learning is a process of meaning making, not knowledge transmission; (b) learning is a dialogue; and (c) the locus of meaning is found in communities of practice, not the head of an individual (Jonassen & Land). Guided by this perspective, this study explores blended learning as a pedagogical strategy to enhance teaching and learning within higher education. Questioning how development of online community within a blended learning design can enhance learning leads us to explore how participants in an online learning event construct and maintain relationships and community.

Research Methodology

This interpretive study focused on students in a health-field related Master's degree program offering both online and on-campus courses at a Canadian university. This program incorporates several blended learning strategies: (1) all students participate in an online and F2F orientation session at the beginning of the program; (2) online courses use a mix of asynchronous and synchronous media, namely WebCT and Elluminate; and (3) students may take a mix of online and F2F courses. In most courses, participation in weekly online discussions is a graded requirement. During the summer of 2006, seven students who had participated in at least one course online were interviewed by telephone or F2F. Participants were women between the ages

of 30 and 54 from several professional and academic backgrounds; full and part-time students in their first, second or third year; and on-campus and distance students. Pseudonyms have been used in this report to help protect the participants' anonymity. Data analysis was done collaboratively between the three researchers. Using the constant comparative method (see Merriam, 2001), and working independently, each researcher first analyzed the transcripts, making notes about the data as well as questions, tentative interpretations, and possible connections. Several meetings ensued to develop a meaningful outline of themes.

Findings and Discussion

Although learners shared a range of beliefs about how they regard, engage in, and validate their participation in online community, most, but not all, believed that feeling connected to a community was an important aspect of their e-learning experience. Learners belonged to several groups: the formal academic community created by instructors, professional communities outside the learning environment, and personal and social communities which emerged from online interactions. For some, the learning community within the course became an extension of their professional network. Three themes highlight how learners construct relationships and communities – both offline and online – in and around their online courses.

Valuing Interaction and Community

Although all learners reported that online discussions contributed to their learning, findings suggest that the value placed on these interactions and developing “community” varied and was in a state of flux. These perceptions were influenced by personal expectations and desire for connection as well as experiences in the online learning event. For most learners, establishing a sense of community was critical for supporting learning. However, community was not an important goal for two learners. Emilie placed more value on interactions with the instructor and Monique stated that, “the majority of [my learning] comes from the material that we read ... and the discussions are just sort of supplementary.” Expectations also shifted in response to what was happening. Data suggests learners consciously gauged their own commitment to, and therefore participation in, group discussions as well as the commitment demonstrated by other learners and instructors. They were conscious of the quantity, quality, and timing of others' postings and there was a sense that participation should be more or less equal.

Learners made conscious decisions about the level of effort they would expend in the online discussions and the investment they would make in the “community.” For several, carefully monitoring their participation was a way of balancing the pull of their different life demands. For some participants, the sense of connection to others had a temporal dimension; lasting only as long as the course. Ruth explains: “We don't have anything except the course in our relationship”. However, Karen had formed a strong community with five others that had lasted two years when we spoke. She explains: “[We've] been together since the start and all of us have a really great rapport together. I know about all their kids now....It's a real family.” For Natalie, making connections was highly valued and she took action when she found this missing: “I wanted to have more. This wasn't enough. ... I went through all the bios and I printed them all off ... I'd ask them, ‘Are the kids sleeping through the night now?’ Just trying to get some kind of social support and some sort of a community feeling.”

These findings support claims of the sociable nature of online conferencing and its ability to foster interpersonal interaction (Rourke & Anderson, 2000) as well as the importance of interaction for supporting learning online (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). When a lack of engagement in online discussions occurred, it seemed to be influenced by perceptions of learners

who did not expect nor place great value on these interactions for their own learning. This is consistent with Stroupe's (2003) report that some students saw the online discussions as "rhetorical filler, styrofoam peanuts around the educational goods" (p. 256). Fung (2004) as well found barriers to participation in online discussions which included time constraints and peer participation marked by a scarcity of interesting questions and lack of active involvement. Our findings also support Conrad's (2002) conclusion that learners made gestures to create a pleasant learning community, fed by their "measured and calculated participation" (§ 39).

Gauging How Much of Me to Share

Participants expressed a range of expectations about the degree of intimacy they wanted with others. Several sought closeness and valued the personal exchanges. Others seemed to regard these online spaces as collegial conversations, limiting their interactions to friendly but course-related exchanges. In most courses, a separate social area was set up (i.e., Colleagues Café) for informal "social" chitchat; spaces that were often empty. Natalie noted there were academic conversations in both the social space and the formal discussion board but no social in the academic. She attributes this to how "academic" postings were constructed: "You might do it in Word and then highlight it and post it whereas in the social space the writing was more spontaneous and it came out way more casual." Nevertheless, offline conversations through e-mail, telephone, and F2F meetings highlight that social exchanges were happening.

All participants highlighted the richness and diversity of perspectives as people spoke from different professions, geographic locations, and work experiences. Unlike the regular postings, stories were highly valued and seemed to flow freely with less calculation of how much time it took to post, read or respond to them. How learners constructed a sense of "belonging" within these online communities seemed to be tied to learning from the practical experiences of others as they listened to and shared stories about being practitioners. As Ruth shared, "through these discussions we supported each other's practices." Perhaps learners revealed more in these stories than they realized, which might explain how some felt they got to "really know others" even though their conversation was limited to "course-related matters."

Our findings question course designs that attempt to separate social and academic conversations. Conrad (2002) doubts the possibility of separating chitchat from the designated learning space. However, she notes that participants drew firm lines around what they would tolerate: a little social talk, digression, and "some limited time both to express personal trauma and to respond to others' crises" (§ 48). Consistent with our findings, Anderson (2004) found participants rely on private e-mail to keep the affective work separate from the learning work; a practice which one participant referred to as "the side of online interaction that disappears" (p. 189). It is not surprising that learners felt more connected to each other and the collective when they shared more of who they were. Yet, what and how much personal information is expected and acceptable in these spaces? How much must people reveal in order to create a bond that enhances their learning experiences? Conrad found that niceness, no anonymity, and prolonged commitment to a learning program increased inhibitions.

Our findings highlight the tensions between what becomes construed as legitimate discourse in an online space. Perhaps stories naturally blend personal information with more academic discourse in a way that does not seem distracting or tangential to the readers. Gray (2004) reports that participants in her study learned through the sharing of stories and thus became a community of practice. For some learners in our study, their online course became a nascent community of practice. Our data suggests that it was the shared practice and stories of

being a community health care professional that provided a thread between participants rather than the coincidence of being registered in the same online course.

Mixing Face-to-Face and Online Interactions

On-campus and distance students participate in a two-part orientation: an online component followed by a four-day on-campus session. All participants commented on the importance of F2F meetings during the orientation, which supports other research affirming their value in online programs (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000). However, posting biographical information and pictures and/or meeting in-person generated anxiety in some participants. Hodgkinson (2002) also found that students can feel “awkward, tense, stressed, pressured, anxious” (p. 211) in anticipation of an orientation session. Moreover, some participants continued to feel uncomfortable during and even after the F2F orientation. Monique shared, “It was hard to be in with a group of people; all people that I’d never met before and to be spending so much time with them.” Emilie, who took most of her courses F2F, was concerned about how another on-campus student would perceive her postings when she discovered they were both in the same online course. The challenge of self-representation is common to new members of online communities (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001) when they cannot assess others’ responses to their posting (Haythornthwaite et al.).

Consistent with Walther et al.’s (2001) research, most participants found it beneficial to have photographs and biographical information. Two participants printed these out and posted them by their computer. Others used this information to initiate conversations and to develop friendship and cohort groups, which persisted throughout the program. These responses suggest that sharing biographies and pictures helped introduce learners to each other. Learners began to build relationships at the outset of the program, a practice which persisted as they continued to interact with classmates online, by phone, through e-mail, and F2F. These findings affirm Haythornthwaite’s (2000) research that students who use more media forms for communication have stronger social ties.

All participants valued the opportunity to meet other students and to meet program administrators and faculty members at the F2F orientation; it seemed to make other people more real. Interacting online, even when sharing photographs, did not seem to provide the same connection. Karen shared, “Sadly you need that F2F contact to get to know somebody.” Lisa commented: “I know who that person is now when I write – it felt safer somehow [after we met F2F].” Other research has found that students consider a F2F meeting important to building community (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000). Interestingly, feelings of community and connection that developed during the orientation did not persist unless reinforced. Monique remarked she felt most connected to students in her first course because “the meeting with them was still clear in my mind. And part of that connection could be because I can visualize them.” Natalie, who took most of her courses on campus, commented, “Once the orientation was over, there was a whole slough of people that left. They just went somewhere else.” These statements support other research that claims “interpersonal ties remain strong, sustained by the memory of names, faces, and shared experiences” in early courses following a F2F orientation (Haythornthwaite et al., *Joining the Community*, ¶ 2), suggesting that if connections are not actively maintained, they dissipate with time.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education

Blended course designs that integrate asynchronous and/or synchronous web-based elements, F2F and online events, and individual and community-oriented interactions are increasing in adult education (Fournier, 2006). Studies such as ours allow educators to examine how learners understand, form, participate in, and exit a diverse array of relational networks. In this study, learners shared a range of experiences on how they participated in on and offline discussions and the relationships they built. Perceptions of the value of the collective influenced their attentiveness to relationship building and engagement online. Some learners defaulted to the minimum course participation requirements while others perceived the online interactions as extremely important to their learning and were very active. Contributions and community appear to be linked synergistically. The more connected individual learners felt to the group, the more they felt they belonged to a community, and the more they wanted to contribute and interact with others. Similarly, the more active the discussion board, the more people felt they connected to the group and the more they felt they got to know other people. Opportunities to meet other learners F2F also helped to forge connections and facilitate a sense of community along the way.

Grace (1997) positions community as a “social construct shaping the adult education teaching-learning” environment (p. 59). However, within the elasticity and shifting boundaries of a learning cyberspace, there are considerable challenges and important implications to consider for the moderation of online discussions as well as for the preparation of students. Given that learners gauge their level of effort in community building based on the participation of others, our findings raise questions about those students who regard themselves as “independent learners” not needing the interaction from others, or “lurkers” who find value in the contributions of others but do not contribute themselves. How can a balance be found for their needs and the needs of the group? Also, given that community is important for learner support, we need to better understand why some students are excluded from certain communities. Do learners develop their own support networks outside the online course environment as a partial response? Evidence showing that F2F meetings (and/or other visual imaging) are important for the development of community creates interesting questions about what to do when these types of meetings or technologies are not feasible. As blended learning experiences hint at a softening of rigid time, place, and space boundaries and “communities” become more permeable and fluid, interesting puzzles for further research and practice continue to emerge for exploration.

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