Successful Community Building in Alternative-Delivery Graduate Programs

Natasja Larson
University of Alberta, Canada

Jim Parsons
University of Alberta, Canada

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Abstract: This session discusses research that shows how community is created and enhanced in the University of Alberta Masters of Educational Studies (MES) graduate program. This hybrid program uses both on-line and face-to-face delivery. The discussion outlines findings from both open-ended survey results and collected notes from students.

In 2002, the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta built an alternative-delivery Masters of Education program to serve teachers and school leaders in Alberta. Because Alberta is a geographically-challenged province and because we had studied other programs, we theorized that building community was crucial to transforming graduate students from isolated learners into functioning communities. We started our MES program utilizing community-building insights. The results were amazing. What have we done to build systematic, personal, and pedagogical communities our graduate students tell us are life-changing, lasting, and engender a recommitment to teaching and leadership? This session outlines our findings about time, space, people, and pedagogy.

We believe a systematically study of our success might help other programs build more vibrant graduate communities. We have come to believe that community ties increase student sharing and growth, foster support, and actively construct an ethic we highlight in three principles: (a) community, (b) agency, and (c) service. We also believe active cooperation among students, and the concomitant program satisfaction that emerged, correlates with community. Our work questions how communities are built or extended in lieu of physical space, through computer-based mediations, and how technologies shape language, relationships, and discourses to create history, culture, and rituals.

Our research method was a survey of closed and open-ended questions that sought insights from recent alumni. This presentation shows how we incarnate a Freirian-style conversational pedagogy that encourages sharing, an active service-orientation philosophy, and site-based school improvement research projects that motivate internal and external agency. We have discovered that residency team communities become family-like support systems in times of celebration or need, that individuals benefit from community membership in personal and corporate ways, the possible constraints of a community that interacts both face-to-face and in a virtual world, and how alternative communities might be bound by traditional mythologies of physical university-campuses.

We believe "knowledge not only exists within the individual minds of a community's members, but also in the communication that unfolds between community members" (Gunawardena, et al., 2006, p.221) Jung, et al. (2002) and Shin (2003) found that students' satisfaction with online learning environments is strongly related to the amount of active interaction with other learners, noting that small group activities can enhance learning motivation. Lee, et. al. (2004) noted that "creating a safe learning environment through positive social relationships can support these interactions and contribute to community development". Our students echo these values: one suggested that "Having developed relationships during my

first summer residency I found the online interaction more meaningful - greater interdependency had been established."

Conclusion

We have come to believe that developing community requires a time investment to maintain and foster growth online, the encouragement and utilization of reflection and dialogue, the building of trust and respect, and the empowerment of members. The program provides opportunities for participants to interact, receive feedback, and learn together. On-line discussions foster interactions and social negotiations of meanings among learners and between learners and instructors. On-line instructional teams are different than in face-to-face environments. Instructional teams must "trust the process" if a community is to construct knowledge. Instructional teams must exorcise preconceived notions of what it means to "teach". Learner support is a key to community because some learners are unable to complete curriculum tasks independently and are constrained by multiple life roles. Peer-review has implications for both teachers and learners, but the commitment to provide feedback at crucial times fosters trust and a nurturing community.

Contrasting support for learning online versus face-to-face, McLoughlin (2002) acknowledges that the same principles exist but the agency of the teacher differs if there is social, peer, and task support, which can be provided by peers and by online functionalities without requiring direct teacher intervention. She maintains, "effective support would need to include the encouragement of reflective thinking, provision of social support for dialogue, interaction and extension of ideas with feedback from peers and mentors on emerging issues" (p.152).

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