Does Sense of Community Matter?  
An Examination of Participants’ Perspectives in Online Courses

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Background

- Online MBA programs have seen a rapid rise in student enrollments during recent years while enrollments in traditional in-residence MBA programs have experienced a decline (Hayward, 2004; Lorenzo, 2004).
- With the increasing popularity of online education, there has been a concern regarding the quality of online education (Diaz, 2002; Islam, 2002; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).
- The Kelley Direct (KD) Instructional Research Team was formed during the 2004 calendar year.
- A comprehensive program evaluation research project was conducted with a primary focus on improving the quality of online teaching and learning.

KD Online Learning Research Group

KD Faculty Training

KD Faculty Training
About IU Kelley Direct Program (KD)

Year Founded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IU</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Arizona State</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
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<td>UN-Lincoln</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>UT-Arington</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>UT-Dallas</td>
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<tr>
<td>UW-Whitewater</td>
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About IU Kelley Direct Program (KD)

Completion rate

- IU: 96%
- Arizona State: 94%
- Carnegie Mellon: 95%
- Duke: 81%
- Florida: 99%
- Georgia: 73%
- Maryland: 90%
- UM-Mich: 80%
- UN-Lincoln: 84%
- Ohio: 0%
- UT-Arington: 0%
- UT-Dallas: 0%
- UW-Whitewater: 65%

* 0 indicates numbers unavailable.

About the Online MBA Program

- Founded in 1999
- Program length: 24 months
- Completion rate: 96%
- Course delivery: online (Course Management System (ANGEL))
- One week in-residence per year
- Number of students: 1398 (as of 2006)
  - Female students: 21%
  - International students: 15%

Growth in Student Enrollments

- Certificate Program
- MS
- Public MBA
- Corporate MBA

Purpose of this Study

- Examine participants’ perceptions of sense of community in online courses
- Explore factors that affect community building in virtual environments
Research Questions

- Do students feel a sense of community in online courses? How does the sense of community correlate with learner engagement, perceived cognitive learning, and satisfaction?
- What are some communication and collaboration strategies used in online courses? How the participants perceive these strategies in facilitating community development in online courses?
- What are student and instructor perceptions of factors affecting building communities in online courses?

Methodology: Survey

- Case study
- Mixed research methods
- Surveys
  - 264 public online MBA students responded
    - 162 first-year students
    - 102 2nd year students
    - Questionnaires handed out during one-week in-residence orientations

Methodology: Interviews

- One-on-One Interviews
  - 26 faculty members of online MBA programs
  - 10 first-year online MBA students
  - 10 second-year online MBA students
- Focus Group Interviews
  - 10 first-year online MBA students
  - 10 second-year online MBA students

Methodology: Content Analysis

- Content Analysis of Course Web sites
  - 27 courses were selected from diverse business disciplines
  - A coding scheme consists of 4 categories:
    - (1) Collaborative discourse,
    - (2) Instructor Presence,
    - (3) virtual team,
    - (4) social interaction
  - Inter-rater reliability between two analysts

Literature Review: Definition

- What is an online class community?
  - The participants of an online course have "a feeling that members belong to each other, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan, & Chavis, 1986. p.9).

Literature: Background

- In line with the exponential growth of online education, there is an increased discussion with regard to building online communities in web-based courses.
- The increased interest is primarily a reaction to two major concerns of distance education: retention and quality (Rovai, 2002).
- The clear directions based on empirical studies in this area is lacking (Lock, 2002).
- No consistent results regarding the role of community in students' learning (Misanchuk, 2003; Brown, 2001).
Literature Review: Benefits

- Enhanced social connection (Eastmond, 1995).
- Reduces the potential attrition rates of online students (Rovai, 2002;).
- Encourage information sharing among learners and spur innovation (Bonk, Wiser, & Nigrelli, 2004).
- The availability of greater support and socio-emotional well being (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Rovai, 2001).

Literature Review: Strategies

- The key role of course design and pedagogy in facilitating community building.
- Two kinds of interaction in facilitating a sense of community (Rovai, 2002).
  - Task-driven interaction facilitates the goal of learning
  - Socio-emotional driven interaction facilitates social well being of members and helps develop friendships

Literature Review: Strategies

- Promote online learning communities through increasing levels of communication and interaction (Misanchuk and Anderson, 2001)
  Strategies include:
  - designing an onsite orientation
  - posting photos and personal profile
  - incorporating an online café for off-topic discussion
  - designing content-based group project that requires extensive negotiation
  - modeling effective communication skills in online discussion.

Literature Review: Technology

- The role of technology
  - Gathering place for a learning community
  - Asynchronous vs synchronous technology (Schwier, 2002; Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998).
  - Asynchronous communications foster deeper dialogue and continuous discourse.
  - Synchronous communications foster social interaction in online courses.

Literature Review: The role of instructor

- The role of instructors
  - Previous research indicates a close relationship between teacher behaviors and the development of virtual learning communities in online courses (Shea et al., 2002).
  - Berge’s (1995) framework of online instructor roles - social role.
  - The inexperienced online instructors often lacked essential social skills (Conrad, 2004)

Findings: Survey Results

- I feel I am part of a learning community when I take MO courses.
  - Strongly Agree: 20%
  - Agree: 30%
  - Neutral: 10%
  - Disagree: 5%
  - Strongly Disagree: 5%

N=406, SD=0.71
Findings: Survey Results

I never felt lonely or isolated when I took KO courses.

M=3.44, SD=1.07

Findings: Survey Results

In general, I think I am deeply engaged in learning in my KO courses.

M=4.07, SD=1.37

Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of community with satisfaction and learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sense of community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning engagement</td>
<td>.52(**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived learning</td>
<td>.50(***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outcome</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>.64(***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(***)&lt;.001</td>
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Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of belonging to a learning community with social presence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of belonging to a learning community</th>
<th>Sense of community</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived familiarity with other students</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not feeling isolated</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His or her comfort level with reading</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>messages or materials online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived emotional presence of</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other students through online interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(***)&lt;.001</td>
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Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of belonging to a learning community with teaching presence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>The perceived helpfulness of the</td>
<td>.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instructor's facilitation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructor offering regular feedback</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative feedback on learning</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performance</td>
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<td>(***)&lt;.001</td>
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Findings: Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Activities</th>
<th>Instructional Activities</th>
<th>Usage (N=17)</th>
<th>Effectiveness of Strategies in Solid Learning Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Asynchronous class       | Synchronous class        | 85%          | "Synchronous class not as challenging as it seemed at first..."
| conference               | conference               | 42%          | "Only in the asynchronous format were group discussions held or small group sessions held at specified times. That was the only real learning community experience as far..." |
| Collaborative discussion | Participate in discussions as part of assessment | 87% | |

(*)
Findings: Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Activities</th>
<th>Percentage of Usage (N=27)</th>
<th>Effectiveness of Strategies in Building Learning Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course announcements</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Regular course announcements and feedback were positively related to the feelings of sense of community (χ²=4.57, p&lt;0.05).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor's active participation in class discussions</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Instructor's active participation in class discussions strongly raised the possibility of providing just-in-time feedback through email.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual office hours</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Instructor participation in team discussions</td>
</tr>
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Findings: Perceptions

- **Pre-existing community**
  - Many instructors noted that the students had a strong desire to work together with people from previous communities or groups.
    - "so there are some students that do like to work together but normally they're people who know each other before they come to class."
  - Students also noted that existing social networks were key sources of gaining academic or emotional support.

- **Social presence**
  - Low social presence in online courses as a barrier to establish intimacy.
  - Online instructors attributed the low social presence to the asynchronous technology.
  - Students attributed the low social presence to the lack of social structures to promote identity formation and socio-emotional ties in the online courses.
Findings: Perceptions

- Instructors did not structure group work for community purpose but believed it fostered sense of connection and community among students.
- Students only felt a sense of community among group but not a sense of community as a class.

"I think we're all going through the same thing in the course and in reading what the other classmates are thinking, whether it's different or the same, it kind of, yeah, it forms a kind of community, but I think the major community that we do form is with our own team members."

Overall Conclusions

- Significant relationship between sense of community and perceived learning engagement, perceived learning, and student satisfaction.
- Community awareness. The findings of this study suggested that there was a weak awareness of online community and low value on its learning impact.
- Different levels of community. The sense of community may come from the group or program level rather than the course level.
- Technology vs Pedagogy. The dichotomy of technical solutions and social solutions to the development of online learning communities is worth noting.
- Social skills. Instructors lacked skills in facilitating social discourse and community development.

Relevant publications

- Liu, K., Bonk, C. J., Nagapudi, R. S., & Lin, S. H. (In preparation). Does sense of community matter? An examination of participants' perceptions of learning through course communities in online MBA courses. Quality Assurance in Distance Education.

Questions?

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