

A study of the relationship between student communication interaction and sense of community

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Abstract

This study developed a quantitative methodology to ascertain lead indicators of student sense of community whilst undertaking a course of study. Study participants ($N=464$) were drawn from students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate Education units within a large Australian metropolitan university. Through juxtaposing student online behaviours with an online survey, the data demonstrates that students and study units with greater frequencies of communication interactions possess stronger levels of sense of community as determined by Rovai's [Rovai, A.P. (2002b). Development of an instrument to measure classroom community. *Internet and Higher Education*, 5(3), 197–211.] Classroom Community Scale (CCS). As a result of the identification of this relationship utilising a quantitative process, education practitioners and managers now possess the formative evaluative tools and indicators necessary to gauge student sense of community on an ongoing basis. Therefore, education managers and practitioners have the capacity to monitor and alter the learning and teaching practices designed and implemented to promote community among the student cohort in a just-in-time environment.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary educators are embracing socio-constructivist practices which emphasise learning as a social and interactive activity (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Levine Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). As a result of this pedagogical philosophy there has been an increased importance placed on implementing educational practices that seek to foster the concept of community. In particular, the development and support of learning communities have been suggested as a means to facilitate and support student learning through the establishment of ongoing social networks (Cho, Lee, Stefanone, & Gay, 2005; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). However, as higher education institutions further promote the introduction of flexible delivery options, there is a corresponding decrease in the requirement for students to attend on-campus lectures. Consequently, the capacity for students to form social networks, and therefore, learning communities, is potentially inhibited as a result of the limited availability for face-to-face interactions (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This

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limitation in the degree of potential interactions available among a group of learners can be largely overcome through the introduction of various information and communication technologies (ICTs). The adoption of these technologies (e.g. computer-mediated communication) among educators provides staff and students with an opportunity to communicate and collaborate regardless of spatial and temporal differences (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, & Robins, 2000).

Given that the education literature suggests that communication amongst community participants is essential for the development of a sense of community (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002a), the integration of computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be seen as an integral component for the establishment of an online community amongst previously disparate individuals (Barajas, 2002; Hew & Cheung, 2003). However, the implementation of CMCs alone does not guarantee community among learners, nor are all attempts at fostering cohesive communities of learners effective (Brook and Oliver, 2003). Consequently, there is a need for the development of potential lead indicators of community to provide practitioners with an ongoing assessment of community development within the learning environment. While tools such as Rovai's (2002b) Classroom Community Scale (CCS) have provided educators with a quantitative measure of community among the student cohort, the complex logistics of administering the CCS instrument to the student population on a regular and large-scale basis is not practical in most situations. Similarly, educational research concerning community has often adopted non-scaleable methodologies that analyse the artefacts of student discourse, such as forum contributions and chat logs, in order to provide an indication of community formation (Tu & Corry, 2001; Vonderwell, 2003). Although these qualitative analyses have provided valuable foundational information concerning community, the characteristics inherent in the methodologies impedes monitoring of developmental indicators and overall scalability.

While research focussing on communities in the educational context suggests that communication frequency (Wood & Smith, 2005) and learner-to-learner discussions (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) are necessary to create and sustain a learning community, there has been little empirical evidence provided to support this notion. This paper reports on an empirical study investigating the correlation between communication behaviours and student perceived classroom sense of community in a large Australian metropolitan university. The paper also proposes a quantitative approach of monitoring direct and observable indicators of community in order to inform educators of learning and teaching practices that facilitate the development of a sense of community amongst learners.

2. Background

The higher education sector is undergoing a shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred pedagogy. Feldman (2000, p. xiii) describes this transition from behaviourist to socio constructivist approaches as a move from the "age of the individual to the era of community". Similarly, Gibson (2003, p. 36) in advocating the evolution towards community-based learning, maintains that the shift from a focus on the "interpersonal to intrapersonal" is central to the way in which individuals learn. Essentially Gibson argues that a focus on socially constructed networks and interactions is more aligned with current perceptions of effective approaches to learning. The development and integration of communities of practice and in particular the concept of learning communities in higher education can be seen as an artefact of this pedagogical transition (Kilpatrick, Barratt, & Jones, 2003). The focus on the concept of community is viewed as a strategy to cater to external (e.g. government accountability, reducing financial resources) and internal (e.g. student attrition and satisfaction) demands whilst advocating effective approaches to learning.

Communities such as learning communities or communities of practice are formed through the aggregation of individuals for the purposes of learning (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). The terms learning communities and communities of practice are often used interchangeably, as both concepts relate to the process of learning and the socialisation that serves to facilitate learning. The associated pedagogical benefits emerging from the introduction of communities have been well documented. Learning communities have been linked to reduced attrition (Tinto, 1998), the promotion of critical thinking skills (Fink, 2003), and facilitation of the achievement of learning outcomes (Gibbs, Angelides, & Michaelides, 2004).

2.1. Sense of community

Although the notion of community has been widely discussed within the literature, researchers are yet to establish an authoritative definition (Harrington, 1997, p. 17). Hillery (1955), in an attempt to ascertain consensus, codified 94 occurrences of the term in sociological studies. Emerging from the data is the notion that community can be

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