

Student Perception of Classroom Community in Online and Resident Courses

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Introduction

A strong sense of community has a marked impact on students' academic success and can be vital for deep meaningful learning (Doll, Jr., 1993). Students who do not feel as if they are part of a community, or that they don't fit in, are much more likely to feel isolation (Morgan and Tam, 1999) and burnout which can ultimately lead to their decision to withdraw from school (Tinto, 1975). With these ideas in mind, this study's aim was to determine the level of community present in three freshman-level university courses, which are taught both online and in traditional classroom settings, with the hope to use that information to improve student academic success in the future.

Community

A community is generally considered to be the inhabitants of a specific geographic location. However, Dictionary.com defines community as "a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists," that is, a group of people who have similar beliefs, interests, feelings, and/or goals.

A classroom community consists of four fundamental elements: spirit; trust; interaction; and learning (Rovai, 2002 B). Attempts to lessen social and psychological distance between instructors and students (Mehrabian, 1971) can be an important step in the creation of a positive perception of classroom community. These "immediacy behaviors," as they are called, can be verbal: calling students by name, using inclusive pronouns, and asking for and giving feedback; or nonverbal: tone of voice, eye contact, smiling, humor, gesturing, moving around the classroom and appropriate touch (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). Numerous studies have found that increased use of immediacy behaviors by instructors leads to students liking their instructors, feeling more motivated, attending class more regularly, and having an increased perception of their learning (Gorham, 1988; Christophel, 1990; Arbaugh, 2001; Rocca, 2004). Students' increased desire to attend class and learn course material is indicative of the existence of a positive classroom community.

While verbal immediacy behaviors can be duplicated in the online classroom nonverbal cues are generally missing from these non-traditional settings. This lack of nonverbal communication between instructors and students may contribute to online students' perceived feeling of isolation and lack of personal attention from their instructors (Hara and Kling, 2001). "Without a feeling of community people are on their own, likely to be anxious, defensive and unwilling to take the risks involved in learning" (Wegerif, 1998). Kerka (1996) found that "The physical separation of online learners can cause feelings of disconnectedness." In spite of online students' perceived feelings of segregation,

Moore (2002) found that the “quality of online learning is comparable to the quality of its traditional programs.” Varlejs (2003) concluded that there is not “significant variation in learning effectiveness between” traditional courses and their online equivalents and that students in online courses learn just as much as their counterparts in live classrooms. Because most previous studies have been conducted using graduate student participants, and an increasing number of online courses are being targeted at younger students, this study was done using three freshman-level university courses with a large percentage of traditional-aged college students.

Survey

This survey was conducted at a large Midwestern university. Students in three freshman-level sciences courses which each have a traditional face to face section and a separate online section were surveyed using Rovai’s (2002 A) Classroom Community Scale (CCS). Both the face to face and online sections of each course were taught by the same instructor. The online sections of all three courses were taught using the Blackboard electronic learning system. In order to allow a community to form in each course, surveys were given in the thirteenth week of the fifteen-week semester. The CCS was chosen because it has been used successfully in numerous previous peer-reviewed journal articles which measured classroom community. The CCS consisted of twenty self-report questions, such as *I feel connected to others in this course*, *I feel reluctant to speak openly*, and *I feel confident that others will support me*. Following each item was a five-point Likert scale of potential responses: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. The participants chose the answer that best reflected their feelings about the item. Scores were computed by adding points assigned to each of the twenty, five-point items, with ten items allocated to each of two subscales, connectedness and learning. These items were reverse-scored where appropriate to ensure the least favorable choice was always assigned a value of one and the most favorable choice was assigned a value of five. The connectedness subscale represented the feelings of students regarding their cohesion, community spirit, trust, and interdependence, that is, their connectedness to their peers and the course instructor. The learning subscale represented the feelings of survey participants regarding the degree to which they shared educational goals and experienced educational benefits by interacting with other members of the course. Scores on each subscale can range from ten to fifty, and overall scores can range from twenty to one hundred, with higher scores reflecting a stronger sense of classroom community.

The CCS was modified to include eight demographic questions such as students’ age, grade point average, and number of siblings. These demographic questions were asked to determine if a student’s perception of community in a classroom could be affected by factors outside of the classroom.

Participants

A total of 74 students (57.4% volunteer rate) in online sections, which were taught using the Blackboard electronic learning system, and 184 students (73.3 % volunteer rate) in the face to face sections participated in the survey. One student listed their age as seventeen or younger, 30 were 18, 65 were 19, 63 were 20, 80 ranged from 21 to 25, and 18 listed their age as 26 or older. There were 72 freshmen, 46 sophomores, 75 juniors, 54 seniors, and 6 graduates. One hundred forty-four (56.9%) were male, one hundred nine (43.1%) were female and six did not answer the question regarding gender. Participation in the survey was not a requirement for students in any of the courses and their decisions regarding participation had no bearing on their course grades. Course instructors had no knowledge of students’ choice to participate, or of students’ answers to survey questions.

Results

A t-test for hypothesis testing was used to determine if there was a significant difference in perception of classroom community between students in traditional face to face classrooms and their peers in

equivalent courses taught online. A t-test was also used to establish if there was significant differentiation in scores in the two subscales, connectedness and learning.

Overall community scores for the sections delivered via the traditional face to face method were significantly higher than scores for the courses delivered online, $t(255) = 3.55, P < .05$. The mean total community scores for face to face sections was 58.10 (SD = 4.46) for the 184 respondents, with 100 being the maximum possible score. For the 74 survey participants from online classes the overall community score mean was 55.24 (SD = 8.32). To determine the possible source of overall community score differences, CCS subscales of connectedness and learning were examined. The connectedness subscale represented the feelings of students regarding their cohesion, community spirit, trust, and interdependence, that is, their connectedness to their peers and the course instructor. The learning subscale represented the feelings of survey participants regarding the degree to which they shared educational goals and experienced educational benefits by interacting with other members of the course. Connectedness scores for students in face to face sections were significantly higher than those of their online peers, $t(255) = 2.81, P < .05$. Scores for the learning subscale were not significantly different based on course delivery method, $t(255) = -1.80, n.s.$

A one way ANOVA was conducted to determine if factors from outside the classroom, size of student's hometown; student's grade point average; and student's age, had a significant impact on their sense of community. There was no significant difference in overall community scores based on the size of a student's home town, $F(5, 250) = 1.55, n.s$; student's grade point average, $F(3, 247) = 0.23, n.s$; or student's age, $F(4, 251) = 1.94, n.s$. Because students reported only two expected course grades, a t-test was run to determine if community scores were affected by expected course grade. No significant difference was found $t(231) = 0.76, n.s$.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Considerations

During interviews with instructors for the courses involved in this study all three instructors stated that they believed that classroom community was "very" or "extremely" important. Each one makes efforts to create community in their classroom because they feel that a sense of community will increase students' enjoyment of class and possibly increase student learning. All three instructors made attempts to create community levels in their online classes that equaled that of their traditional sections. Each used the Discussion Board application of their Blackboard course pages for their online courses to try to duplicate the student to student interaction that occurs in their face to face sections. One of these faculty members stated that students read each other's posts, "but do not interact at levels that I would like." Another said that use of the discussion board to "force" community was "marginally successful." The third instructor stated that although use of the discussion board to get students to "talk" to each other has worked in other courses, it has been inconsistent, at best, in this course. The results of this survey support these faculty observations.

As stated previously, the instructors for the courses used for this study strived to create equal levels of community between their face to face and online class sections, with the purpose of increasing student learning. The results of this study illustrate that this was not the case for these three courses. Not only did students in the online sections in this study perceive no significant difference in their learning, the course instructors reported that average grades were similar for each section. Does this mean that a feeling of community is not necessary for online students to be successful? That is a possibility that may need to be explored with future studies. Another possibility is that students in online courses have the potential to be even more successful if instructors are able to raise perceived community in their online courses to a level equal to that in their traditionally-delivered courses. Could it be, as one instructor suggested, that the students involved in this survey are not interested in being part of a classroom community and they took these courses online because they thought they would be less

interactive? This question could be answered by including a study component that addressed students' learning styles and/or their motivation for taking online courses. An additional consideration for the comparable levels of perceived learning between the two course delivery methods is that online students have access to learning materials when they want and need them. Their learning is not limited by the constraints of a regularly-scheduled class time and any deficiency in community is overridden by the flexibility of online course delivery. While there are many questions that can be asked and answered with future studies, it can be concluded from this study that students in online courses do not perceive community at as high a rate as their peers in face to face classes, however, their success in class and their beliefs that their learning goals are being met are not effected by this lack of community.

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<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/community>

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