

# Fostering Student Engagement through an Online Community of Learning

## *A Mixed Methods Action Research Dissertation*

### Study context & overview

#### Larger Context

- Education and technology are evolving.
- Higher education institutions strive to serve communities at a local and global scale.
- The demand for online education programs are on the rise.
- It is important for online programs to facilitate high-quality learning environments as well as to assess whether student achievement and success is supported online.
- With an emphasis on assessment, accountability, and transparency at all levels of education makes it necessary that the effectiveness of online programs are supported by sound research and data.

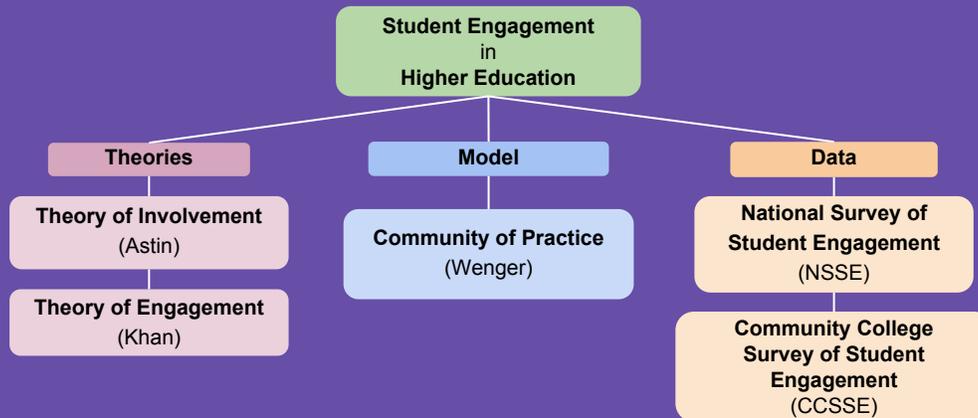
### Local Context

- Sr. Instructional Designer at Arizona State University.
- Over the past 6 years I have worked with faculty to design and develop their courses online.
- Faculty have expressed valid concerns over how to best foster student engagement, specifically how to foster authentic discussions leading to meaningful learning opportunities, in their online courses.

### Previous Cycles of Research

- Conducted three semi-structured interviews with online course instructors surrounding their experiences of teaching online.
- Administered a 6-point Likert scale survey to ASU Online undergraduate students to better understand general perceptions of online courses.

### Theoretical Perspectives and Research Guiding the Study



### Theoretical framework



## Study methods

- Action Research mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative data).
- Sequential Triangulation Design was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.
- SPSS was used to assess all quantitative data (pre- and post- surveys).
- Gerund analysis and open thematic coding was used to assess all qualitative data (online synchronous focus group).
- All data was collected during the fall A & B 2018 academic term.

## Major findings

- Online students “**agree**” that the inclusion of diverse perspectives were important and found value in having opportunities to share knowledge with their peers as well as having knowledge shared with them.
- Participants “**agree**” that an online learning community is beneficial and that this type of model is one they are willing to participate in the future.
- Based on statements expressed within the **synchronous online focus group**, participants felt a disconnect with peers when engagement opportunities presented felt ingenuine often resulting in an “**echo chamber**” of “**rote responses**.”

## Implications for Practice

### Online course instructors

- Implement an online learning community into their course design.
- Actively participate in the online learning community.

### Instructional designers

- Encourage the use of an online learning community to instructors when designing courses for engaged learning.

## Implications for Research

- Explore other aspects of the theory of engagement that may be beneficial for students both in and beyond the online learning community.
- Choose activities that encourage the activation of physical and psychological functions that promote engagement amongst community members.
- Explore the use of additional community of practice structures that might engage online learners more fully throughout their academic learning.

## Study Limitations

- Lack of participant time and interest to complete post-surveys as well as engage in the online focus group.
- Redundancy of participant responses in the online focus group.
- Participants influenced by other comments shared in the online focus group.
- Absence of faculty participation in the study’s innovation.

## Personal Lessons Learned

- Student’s time and availability.
- Flexibility when working with online course instructors.
- Recommend implementing an online learning community.