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

- Demographics
- Involvement
- Community of Practice
- An Online Community of Learning

- Student Engagement in Higher Education
  - Theories
    - Theory of Involvement (Astin)
    - Theory of Engagement (Khan)
  - Model
    - Community of Practice (Wenger)
  - Data
    - National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
    - Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)
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.”

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.

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.