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Using Collaborative Group Learning Principles to Foster Community in Online Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on group work principles to emphasize the importance of collaboration and community as an effective pedagogical approach to teaching in online higher education. Online communities can serve as support groups by bringing together people going through the shared experience of higher education and providing the opportunity for students to share their experiences, feelings, and coping strategies to increase their capacity to learn. In addition to faculty and course material, online communities play an essential role in knowledge attainment. The importance of online communities for knowledge attainment and support groups will be discussed, group work theories will be reviewed, as well as the implications for practice. A case example from experience teaching a graduate level group work course online will be shared.

KEYWORDS

Teaching; online learning; community; collaborative groups; higher education

Introduction

Past research indicates that a student's connection to the educational community has more than just social advantages for students, it also has emotional, academic, and physical benefits as well. Students who do not have a sense of belonging are more likely to have higher levels of mental and physical illness, higher dropout rates, and report feelings of rejection and isolation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hughes, 2007; Pilcher, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). As educators, we can create a more adaptive learning environment for students by promoting connectivity to their environment. Educators are particularly positioned to help foster a sense of connectivity among their students through group-based learning that can result in not just a richer learning experience, and greater knowledge attainment, but long term emotional, psychological, and physical benefits as well. Think back to your favorite classes and those memories most likely include courses in which group-based learning and discussions took place, where knowledge attainment was enhanced through experiential learning by both the instructor and peers, and where the class became a community in which it felt safe to discuss the course material both in and outside the classroom. Let us not lose this advantage in online learning platforms.

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The importance of fostering community is even more apparent in online learning since human connection is often more difficult than in traditional classrooms. To facilitate positive outcomes in online educational platforms, educators should consider not only the content delivery but also the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that is sensitive to and understanding of students needs to connect to one another (Herbert, 2007). Educators who are able to facilitate a sense of community and student engagement in both synchronous and asynchronous online platforms significantly affect student satisfaction, quality of learning, and knowledge attainment (Liu et al., 2007; Rovai et al., 2005; Young & Bruce, 2011). Research has also shown that students who feel connected (as opposed to isolated) are better prepared to become more actively engaged with online learning and that such a sense of connectedness results in higher-order thinking and knowledge building (Baker, 2010; Engstrom et al., 2008; Young & Bruce, 2011). Positive collaborative learning experiences can help to create a safe space which allows students to increase participation and connection through which they can enhance their critical thinking, exchange reflections, and share helpful feedback among peers in the online platform (Boermaet al., 2007; Holley & Dobson, 2008; Young & Bruce, 2011).

Social work education is changing rapidly with the incorporation of online platforms. Fully virtual courses allow learners to interact with peers and educators through the use of technology, both asynchronously and synchronously, via video technology. As the public opinion of online education is becoming more positive, graduate schools are creating more online programming to keep up with the demand. However, serious questions around the delivery of experiential learning while utilizing the online platform remain. Despite the increased quantity of online programs, questions around quality are being raised concerning the loss of collaborative learning and community, especially within courses where experiential learning is essential, like in social work education. In many of the helping professions, where experiential learning is a pedagogical staple, the online platform becomes problematic. In other words, how can skills like empathy be taught without the ability to model this basic human interaction? Although the use of synchronous online technology is beginning to address this concern, much still needs to be developed in this area.

There are positive attributes of online education. It helps foster skill including, but not limited to, cultural and global awareness, self-direction, risk-taking, creativity, communication, and real-world applications of knowledge. However, the controversy rests on whether online platforms allow for experiential learning, collaboration, and community. Research that supports the growth of online learning suggests that learners need collaboration to increase engagement, participation, and activity.

Group work principles emphasize the importance of collaboration and community as a significant source of knowledge in addition to faculty and course material. The mutual-aid social work model with groups refers to people helping one another as they think things through (Steinberg, 2014).

Schwartz (1961) perceived the social work group as:

an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on certain common problems. The important fact is that this is a helping system in which the clients need each other as well as the worker. This need to use each other, to create not one but many helping relationships, is a vital ingredient of the group process and constituted a common need over and above the specific task for which the group was formed. (p. 19)

An online education community is a group comprised of individuals who come together as part of the university or specific course to work on common educational issues, interests, and tasks. If members develop a sense of common purpose, they will begin to share common experiences and concerns. Initially, the group members will present safer and less threatening topics to gauge other members' trustworthiness and genuineness. Through this testing process, members begin to develop and reinforce mutual bonds and alliances as they process the roles of each member and the group's interpersonal system. When members experience collective support and individual comfort, they develop an increased willingness to risk more personal and even taboo concerns (Gitterman, 1986, 1989, 2004). This process is often faster in the online setting as students feel safer to share sooner through the protection of the screen.

These group work principles can be applied to learning, as humans are active learners and not just passive vessels to be filled with knowledge. In fact, through the use of mutual-aid, students learn by helping one another. Being a member of a learning community allows students to increase understanding through questioning, discussion, reflection, and critical thinking within a community of fellow learners. Mutual-aid can also lead to online societies, which not only foster increased knowledge attainment but a sense of support as well. Online societies are a community whose members interact with each other primarily via the internet and usually share a common interest or experience. For many, these communities consist of a family of invisible friends. An online community can act as an information system where members can post, comment on discussions, give advice or collaborate. A virtual society is defined as an aggregation of individuals who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported or mediated by technology, and guided by protocols or norms (Porter, 2004). Such communities can serve as supportive spaces by bringing together people who are going through the shared experience of higher education. They provide the opportunity for individuals to share their experiences, feelings,

and coping strategies to increase their capacity to learn. This article outlines how to support these relationships both in and outside the classroom to enrich students' educational attainment and learning experiences.

Importance of online communities

Research has shown that students' sense of belonging to their educational community has favorable outcomes such as a strong positive correlation to increased school performance and academic achievement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pilcher, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). Humans have a fundamental need to belong, and other needs, such as learning, cannot be met without first satisfying this need (Maslow, 1968). Strayhorn (2012) determined that a sense of belonging is defined as the feeling of being valued, needed, and significant within a community. This is a basic human need that must be fulfilled before students can succeed in any endeavor, especially one as cognitive and emotionally focused as a professional degree. A student's sense of belonging and integration into the school community is described as a student's perceived social support, feeling of connectivity with their environment, and their perception of being accepted, respected, and essential to the school (Pilcher, 2016).

Online students benefit from collaborative group learning by sharing their perspectives, ideas, and personal experiences with their peers, thereby deepening their understanding with increasing higher-order thinking and greater personal satisfaction. Unique to the online platform, when used in the confines of a supportive environment, these communities can provide a safeguard allowing students to engage in dialogue thoughtfully and respectfully, with less fear of discrimination based on cultural or ethnic differences as the screen serves as a safety feature (Cameron et al., 2009; Meyers, 2008; Rovai, 2007; Wang, 2007; Young & Bruce, 2011). Not only does the technology integrated into the online platform foster safety through anonymity, but the emergence of online learning has made it possible for educational communities to be made accessible to a diverse membership, cross-cultural, cross demographics, meeting together in real-time, often for the first time (Mercer, 2000; Perrotta, 2006; Pilcher, 2016; Rovai, 2002; Rovai et al., 2004). An online class can consist of students from all over the world, creating a diverse class that is often impossible in a traditional classroom.

However, with the positives have come negative attributes, including the potential for discourse, disconnection, and feelings of isolation among students, which highlights the importance of fostering a sense of community (Akyol et al., 2009; Dawson, 2006; Pilcher, 2016; Rovai, 2002). The distance between students can also lead to inconsiderate comments and negative reactions, especially when responding to the ideas and efforts of others in their group or class since the screen creates an artificial safety barrier allowing them to express themselves without fear of retribution. As indicated earlier,

a strong sense of educational community increases students' experiences in any academic situation. It is even more critical for a student in an online platform due to the unique nature of the online communities. The use of technology both brings students together from all over the world but of course also recognizes a sense of distance as they are not sitting together in a traditional classroom.

Overview of group work theories

Many educators across disciplines have benefited from using group work to enhance their students' learning through peer-to-peer interaction either to increase students' understanding of class content, build skills, or some combination of the two. This type of group work is conceptualized as using small groups to promote knowledge attainment through collaborative learning to maximize their own and each other's knowledge (Johnson et al., 2014). Classmates can help increase their knowledge base by helping other students who may be struggling with the material. Group-based work can be formal or informal, but it often involves specific instructor intervention to maximize student interaction and learning. Group-based work can be one of the most effective teaching approaches available to educators as it incorporates the application of learned material in an experiential learning space that is controlled and supervised. Furthermore, it is adaptable, as group-based work can be incorporated in small and large classes and across disciplines and platforms.

The use of cooperative learning groups in education is based on the principle of constructivism. Constructivist theory states that students learn through building their knowledge, connecting new ideas and experiences to existing knowledge and skills to form new or enhanced understandings through social interactions (Brame & Biel, 2012; Bransford et al., 1999), which means that, through critical thinking, students can add new knowledge to the bank of old knowledge. The role that groups play in education was initially based on social interdependence theory, which grew out of Kurt Lewin's and Kurt Lewin's identification of groups as active entities leading to a common goal of acquiring new knowledge. Lev Vygotsky extended this work by developing the sociocultural theory of development by examining the relationship between cognitive processes and social activities. The sociocultural theory of development suggests that learning occurs when students solve problems beyond their current developmental level with the support of their instructor and their peers. (Brame & Biel, 2012; Davidson & Major, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014). Sociocultural theory also proposes that learning through and within relationships deepens learning, investment in learning, and builds capacity.

Cooperative group learning builds upon this framework as student groups work together to learn or solve a problem, with each individual responsible for understanding all aspects of the proposed question (Brame & Biel, 2012). The small groups are essential to this process as working together requires that students be heard and can hear their peers. As a result, students may retain more content as they must apply what they have learned. If a student does not understand a specific component, the other group members can help teach that student. This is even more important as students learning on an asynchronous online platform may have less opportunity for experiential learning outside of the text-based platform (i.e., the use of e-mail, discussion forum, or other text-based platforms). Cooperative group-based learning not only assists the student in obtaining the targeted educational goals of the instructor but also leads to a sense of community among the students. When learning in an asynchronous online platform, the majority of the students are required to learn by reading or watching the modules, then responding with one or at most two text-based responses. This format allows for very little space for collaboration or problem-solving.

With the integration of online group-based work, students are given the opportunity to learn together. For example, when teaching Human Behavior in the Social Environment, instead of having paper-based projects completed asynchronously, students are split into small groups and assigned a developmental stage. Each group must compose a PowerPoint presentation and teach their developmental stage to the rest of the class. Without assignments such as this, students likely would not have any meaningful communication with one another in real-time. However, this type of assignment requires students to work together in small groups, create space for collaboration or problem-solving, and foster community. Exclusive text-based educational experiences are likely insufficient for students to break down the barriers created by distance and the lack of face-to-face interaction (Exter et al., 2009). Yet it is clear that for students to be successful learners, they require not just the academic content but social interaction as well (Rovai et al., 2004; Young & Bruce, 2011).

According to Rovai (2002), an online community can be enhanced in seven ways: decreasing the learners' transactional space, increasing social presence, providing equal opportunity for involvement, designing small group activities, facilitating group discussions, matching teaching style with the learning stage, and limiting class size. These outcomes cannot be accomplished via a solely text-based context. As such, all online classes should have some interactive components allowing for a space to create a sense of community. Community is based on what groups of people share and do with one another, not how or where they do them (Holley & Dobson, 2008; Rovai, 2002; Young & Bruce, 2011), and such community can and should be crested in online educational platforms.

The role of the educator

The instructor is the most influential individual in establishing community through the use of group-based learning. Indeed, without interaction, one cannot create a sense of community, yet individuals are naturally inclined to develop social relationships. People who have things in common, share similar experiences, or are simply exposed to each other frequently will form social attachments to one another (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Emerging interaction, dialogue, and mutual exchanges are essential for fostering a sense of community, feelings of connection, trust, and familiarity, which lead to a positive learning environment and increased knowledge attainment (Delahunty et al., 2013; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2009; Pilcher, 2016; Ryman et al., 2009). If given the opportunities to do so, online students often bond to each other earlier than students sitting in a live classroom because the level of anonymity in the online platform allows online students to self-disclose to a greater extent with greater safety.

For students to engage in group-based learning, they must be given opportunities to talk about what they learn, write about it, and relate it to current and past experiences. When students contribute to the online class through discussions and collaboration, other than just a one-off text-based response, they engage in the process of interacting with the content. There are many occasions to include opportunities for collaborative interaction within an online course, and collaborative learning can be easily facilitated in an online course through the use of technology. Peer-to-peer learning and communication can be accomplished through study groups, discussion, group projects, peer facilitation, answering each other's questions, and encouraging one another (Lee, 2010). Sharing information, providing and receiving feedback from peers, and working on group projects contribute to learning, knowledge attainment, and developing a sense of community (Delahunty et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2007; Pilcher, 2016). Intentional course design and instructor facilitation with an increased opportunity for interaction are repeatedly shown in the literature to increase the sense of community students' experience in online courses.

To provide the best online practices, there is an emphasis on the need for educators to validate all student perspectives, as well as acknowledge differing beliefs and biases, in order to create a safe and welcoming environment that will help students become engaged and feel interconnected. The online platform for course delivery creates a unique environment that requires thoughtful care for educators to help students become engaged in their learning and design a virtual classroom space that promotes a sense of community (Meyers, 2008). When educators carefully plan ways for students to interact through group-based work, they can focus on achieving course learning goals while establishing a sense of community and a social support network. Students who

learn the most from online courses enjoy educators who provide both a structured and comfortable classroom environment that involves the student in learning activities (Young, 2006). Teaching strategies that promote group-based learning and classroom community with free and open communication facilitate the engagement of students, which in turn enhances the quality of student learning and knowledge attainment (Liu et al., 2007; Meyers, 2008; Oriogun et al., 2005; Young & Bruce, 2011).

More than just course development, students are susceptible to their educator's presence or absence in an online classroom. There is a clear connection between perceived teaching presence and a student's sense of satisfaction within an online course (Shea et al., 2006). An educator can only foster a sense of community among students by modeling connectivity and having an active presence. The role of teaching in online education is significantly different than teaching in a traditional classroom. The online educator has evolved from the position of the lecturer to a facilitator who focuses on helping students manage the technological needs of an online course, complete the online modules for knowledge attainment, and to collaborate in developing a personal understanding of course content (Bailey & Card, 2009; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Pilcher, 2016). As in the traditional classroom, online facilitation of the course contributes more to the learning environment and sense of community than course design, content, or the institution.

Research has identified five ways to establish educator presence in the online classroom. First, develop activities that promote interaction and socialization, such as group-based activities. Second, check-in with the students regularly and provide open communication and an explicit schedule. Third, promptly provide feedback and responses and be clear on what students can expect from feedback – for example, track changes within one week via e-mail. Fourth, facilitate appropriate dialogue by clearly communicating expectations and creating clear boundaries through contracting. Finally, educators should play the role of moderator for student interactions and intervene as necessary (Buchanan, 2000; Pilcher, 2016; Rovai, 2007; Rovai et al., 2008). As with in-person classes, it is also best practice for educators to have a live presence through the use of video conference office hours throughout the semester to answer student questions individually.

To be an effective online educator, the instructor must not only facilitate community through course development but also model appropriate connectivity. The most important way for educators to do so is by providing students with relevant feedback and clear communication. Students need timely feedback on their performance, suggestions for improvement, and validation of work well done to feel supported and to know that they are meeting course expectations (Shea et al., 2006). Students in online platforms often require clear communication and regular announcements to indicate that the educator is engaged with the course as they do not have the face to face time with the

educator as traditional students do. This heightened out of class regular communication also encourages students to be engaged themselves and with each other, which assists in the fostering of a sense of community.

To summarize, students want to feel that their instructors are present and that they care. Online education can be impactful as traditional education, but to be effective, online courses need to be actively collaborative and have a strong educator presence (Dixson, 2010).

Case example

The following example will show how collaborative group work can be integrated into an online platform effectively to promote community. This example derives from a Social Work with Groups class taught in an online platform that integrated synchronous and asynchronous platforms in a Master of Social Work program. The curriculum and course design were developed to promote teaching group work principles through experiential learning and collaboration.

The class format was as follows: each week, the students viewed asynchronous course material, including assigned readings, a variety of instructional videos, and completed written assignments. Each week, the class then would come together via a telecommunication platform for the synchronous component. At that point, the educator would facilitate a group discussion based on the topics from the weeks' asynchronous work. These discussions not only served as a moment of clarification but were also a moment of experiential learning as the educator was mindfully role modeling how to facilitate a group. The instructor also often separated the class into small groups to complete group-based work, further allowing students to take on various roles. To address student's failure to contribute equitably to the group project, each member submitted a statement outlining their personal contribution.

The students in this course initially demonstrated some trepidation toward contributing to the collaborative group work and showed a desire to get to know their peers better. At the beginning stages, the instructor took on an active leadership role in the break-out sessions to foster connectives as well as foster mutual-aid and community. The students were willing to introduce themselves to the online group if prompted and acknowledged the benefits of group work. However, the students come into the course not knowing the other classmates (other than through past text-based interaction) and with lowered expectations of communications because of their past experiences with the online environment.

As the class moved to the middle stages, the instructor assumed a less active role in the break-out sessions. The group was able to work collaboratively on the assignments, furthering their education through mutual-aid. Mid-semester, there was a truly remarkable moment when one student disclosed

that she was struggling financially. This student took synchronous online classes as she was a mother of 4 children whose husband, a veteran, recently returned from military deployment and was experiencing PTSD symptoms. The online format allowed her to obtain her education in real-time while having the mobility her family life required. Due to the client's current situation, she found it difficult to focus on her schoolwork and was unable to complete her assignments on time. The other students in the class came together as a community and offered emotional support. They also provided resources, study groups, focusing skills, and petitioned the instructor for an assignment extension. At this moment, the students had become group workers, working at both a macro and micro level, to support their colleague. They demonstrated skill in empathy, engagement, assessment, and advocacy. This class became more than just one in group work. The experience not only allowed for the application of the skills learned in the course but also a moment for genuine collaboration and bonding. These students came together from all over the world to support this student at this moment. Suppose this course did not integrate the group-based learning model. In that case, this student's needs might have gone unaddressed, resulting in her not completing the assignment and ultimately withdrawing from the class and the program. Further, the other students may not have had the opportunity to have practiced their social work group skills resulting in mutual aid and higher learning.

When asked about their experiences in the course evaluations, students described favorite and least-favorite aspects of their online courses and stated that the social exchanges were their favorite, and text-based exchanges were their least favorite. Participants reported that not only did they retain more knowledge but that this was indeed their favorite class as they felt they had built a community of fellow students and remained close after the course had ended. The class became a support group of its own to help students manage being in graduate school. Even students who reported no connection to the course content stated that the feeling of community resulting from this class helped them improve their grades in other courses as they felt they were no longer studying alone in "cyberspace" but rather were now part of a group of students learning together. This example is one of many that highlights the importance of using a collaborative group work modality to facilitate building a community.

Conclusion

Educators should foster online learning environments that create a strong sense of community and belonging for students through the use of collaborative group learning. Research shows that online students frequently feel disconnected when compared to traditional students, but the educator can

combat this isolation by nurturing a sense of connectivity to a virtual classroom community. Students with a strong sense of community showed higher levels of learning and satisfaction. While multiple factors may contribute to a sense of community in an online course, such as the institution and the course design, the educator is the most influential.

The benefits of learning collaborative skills and developing productive community participation expertise within online platforms will be far-reaching. Students will not only benefit in the course by increasing their knowledge of the topic but also gain skills that can bring success throughout their education and careers. Education is changing rapidly with the incorporation of online platforms, and online collaboration is required to succeed in every industry. Not only will our students benefit through collaborative group based online learning, they also will learn a much-needed skill to be successful in our everchanging society. Human beings are collaborative in nature and have an innate need to establish relationships with other humans. We are raised in family groups, are educated, work, and worship in groups. Regardless of career choice, a considerable part of our work life is spent in team-based collaborations. Not all these collaborations are face to face; however, our online collaborations are dramatically increasing with the use of technology. We must prepare our students to be successful in these collaborations and to become productive participants in these online communities. We can do this by modeling the desired behaviors in the online classroom

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