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Instructors' Perceptions of Community and Engagement in Online Courses

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Abstract: *Instructor facilitation and communication is foundational in building online community and engagement. Instructors' perceptions about strategies they use are key to improving online community and engagement. Findings of this study indicate that instructors' perceived high levels of community building and engagement in online classes. Instructors identify student contact with instructor, personal connections among students, and organization as critical factors in a positive online learning environment.*
Keywords: *Online Instruction, Student Engagement, Learning Community*

Community and engagement among students in online courses have emerged as topics of interest in distance education (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Bailey & Card, 2009; Liu et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Wilson et al., 2004; Young & Bruce, 2011). Classroom community and student engagement are closely related to one another; students who feel a sense of connectedness rather than isolation are very likely better prepared to become more actively involved with course learning. Increased student satisfaction, motivation, and effective learning are associated with community and student engagement in the online environment (An et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Wilson et al., 2004; Young & Bruce, 2011). Instructors' perceptions of community and engagement in online courses are an important factor in assessing strategies that work best for creating online community and enhancing student engagement. This study investigated instructors' perceptions of their employment of strategies for building community and student engagement in the online classroom.

An et al. (2009) noted that, based on substantial literature, online learning communities and social presence are important factors in helping students actively engage in the online classroom, thereby increasing their feelings of being part of the learning group and being strongly connected to others in the course. Liu et al. (2007) conducted a case study of online degree programs and found a relationship between perceptions of community and engagement. In addition, Liu et al. (2007) found a relationship between community building and reducing students' feelings of isolation. At the same time the authors found the probability of withdrawal from online courses was reduced when students felt connected with others (Liu et al., 2007). These results indicate the importance of community in the online classroom. Wilson et al. (2004)

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explained the following rationale for creating online learning communities: "Learning communities provide a social context for the material, students feel more connected within a community, and learning communities can serve as a bridge between school and work environments" (p. 3). Connectedness and social aspects help students cope with the lack of face-to-face contact in online classes because they fill the void in this desired human interaction.

Instructor facilitation and communication is foundational in online community building and engagement. Ko and Rossen (2010) suggested strategies for communicating with students in online classes such as posting announcements to keep students reminded and informed, as well as setting rules and protocols for communication in the class such as discussion posts. An et al. (2009) concluded that thoughtful instructional strategies are critical in generating more student interactions, and it is important to systematically design online learning environments where learners can build a community through the discussion setting. Since a significant amount of communication occurs in the discussions in online classes, this area has great potential for increasing community and student engagement.

Bailey and Card (2009) interviewed award-winning online instructors. They conducted a qualitative, phenomenological analysis of the participants' responses. Eight effective pedagogical practices for effective online teaching were shared, "fostering relationships, engagement, timeliness, communication, organization, technology, flexibility, and high expectations" (p. 154). The authors also found that participants listed interactive activities among students and instructors such as sharing photos and biographies, participating in an informal class blog, and assigning small group projects, as successful ways to engage students in their learning. These findings suggest students feel more meaningfully engaged in online courses when instructors participate actively in discussions thus creating an essential sense of instructor presence (Arbaugh, 2010; Sung & Mayer, 2012).

Arguments in favor of building community and engagement in the online classroom are provided in the literature (An et al., 2009; Bailey & Card, 2009; Dixon, 2010; Liu et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Wilson et al., 2004; Young & Bruce, 2011). However to further enhance success, there is a need to examine and evaluate instructors' strategies for enhancing community and engagement in online classes. Seok, Kinsell, DaCosta, and Tung (2010) compared instructors' and students' perceptions of online course effectiveness. The findings indicated that "…instructors had statistically significant higher perceptions toward online course effectiveness than students" in the areas of getting started, course management, communications, and content" (p. 34). These findings indicated there might be a gap between instructors' perceptions and what is actually occurring in online classes. This study also showed instructors with advanced technology skills had positive perceptions of online course effectiveness (Seok et al.). Technology skills are not necessarily indicative of effective teaching; therefore this finding also suggests the need for further research on instructors' perceptions.

Researchers have provided a variety of suggestions for best practices in online teaching for building community and student engagement. Wilson et al. (2004) suggested that it is important in building online communities, for online instructors to "model community participation skills and values, including turn-taking, netiquette, thoughtful responses to peer's posts, and organization and facilitation of community events and chat" (p. 10). In addition, instructors should interact with students in discussions to guide them in community building and be present in conversations where issues among students might arise (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Liu et al. (2007) noted that without instructor attention and monitoring, strategic planning and support, purposeful assignments and activities, online communities cannot be created on their own. Historically, Rovai (2002) suggested using both task-driven and socio-emotional interactions to enhance sense of community cognitively and psychologically.

Audience considerations are important in online course design. Richardson and Newby (2006) suggested that instructors must consider issues such as student age, experience in online coursework, program, etc. when designing an online course. These considerations enhance course design and provide a foundation for choosing technological tools for the course. Technology choices are vast in today's world and research has suggested technology is improving teaching and learning. Using new technologies, such as podcasting and vodcasting, may add interest and anticipation to online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012). Specifically emerging video technologies offer a myriad of possibilities for students and instructors to ease the sense of isolation and enhance interactions related to course material and learning (Sherer & Shea, 2011). They also help build instructor student relationships while tapping into different modes of learning (Bailey & Card, 2009; Borup et al., 2012; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Sull, 2010). Also, informal activities that can enhance social presence and connections include the posting of biographies, pictures, and an exchange of unique personal updates on social networking sites and course message boards (Lester & Perini, 2010). Social networking is a place where students live and can be engaged; utilizing it for course content is a way to engage students and increase community online. Technology use is a crucial factor in enhancing student engagement and community that should be considered when designing courses.

Additionally, online instructors' communication frequency and interaction is important in enhancing distance learning for students. Based on their research findings, Dennen, Darabi, and Smith (2007) asserted online instructors should "… maintain frequency of contact with students in a timely manner, have a regular presence in class discussion spaces, and make expectations clear to learners through the use of example assignments or models of discussion posts" (p. 77). These practices will help students perform better and increase their satisfaction with the course. However, according to Arbaugh (2010), in his study of 46 online courses across 2 years, instructors must moderate the intensity of their interactions and not take excessive responsibility for student attitudes that results in less student perceived learning and satisfaction.

Many suggestions have been made about building online community and student engagement based on research findings. Dixon (2010) noted that opportunities for meaningful interactions online help students perceive a sense of belonging and engagement despite the lack of face-to-face presence. With this in mind, it is important to gain understanding about the relationship among online community and engagement. Instructors' perceptions about strategies they use for facilitating this are key to improving online community and engagement. The research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What strategies do online instructors use to engage students and build community in online learning?
2. What are differences across disciplines (colleges) in how instructors perceive they are creating engagement and building community?
3. What are the differences in perceptions of creating engagement and building community online among male and female instructors?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

All instructors teaching online at a university in the Rocky Mountain region were invited to participate in the study during the 2011 spring semester. Courses were in education, health sciences, business, arts and sciences, and agriculture. A total of 75 instructors were invited to complete a survey.

An online survey was adapted from Young and Bruce (2011) to assess the degree to which instructors believed they engaged students with learning in the course and developed a classroom community. Twenty-eight items were developed based on research that was grounded in student engagement (11 items) and classroom community (17 items). Reliability for the community sub-scale was 0.73, and for the engagement sub-scale was 0.63. Overall reliability for the scale was 0.81. In addition, instructors were asked to provide some demographic information. The survey was expected to take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The initial invitation was sent to instructors about a month prior to the end of the semester, followed by two reminders at one-week intervals. Forty-three instructors responded for an overall response rate of 57% (n=43).

RESULTS

Participants responded to several demographic questions on the survey. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents described themselves as male (n=16), while 56% (n=24) indicated they were female. Instructors reported that they had taught courses online an average of 16.6 times, often teaching the same course multiple times.

What strategies do online instructors use to engage students and build community in online learning? Means and standard deviations were found for items on the two sub-scales and rank ordered to indicate items that appeared to most strongly describe how instructors were working to create community and engagement in their online courses. Table 1 below shows the rank-ordered community items and Table 2 shows the rank-ordered engagement items. Overall, instructors perceived that they provided well-organized courses, they are fair and available, and that they work hard to create strong connections with their students. All of these strategies lead to classrooms that have a strong sense of community and engagement in student learning.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Community Scale Items in Rank Order*

Item	M	SD
Make sure course guidelines are clear	4.81	.40
Encourage contact at any time	4.79	.78
Expect students to participate in class discussions	4.76	.62
Consistent about enforcing course rules	4.67	.53
Take personal interest	4.64	.62
Maintain close connections with students	4.63	1.38
Design activities for student interaction	4.35	1.12
Participate in online discussions	4.15	1.13
Students appear to enjoy interacting	4.07	.87
Trust students to handle inappropriateness	3.85	.96
Encourage students to ask questions of each other	3.69	1.29
Communicate regularly with individual students	3.61	1.18
Encourage students to work together on projects	3.44	1.61
Organize small groups so students help each other	3.34	1.84
Create opportunities for students to connect personally	3.34	1.51
Allow students to respond first in online discussions	3.27	1.07
Provide a online forum only for students	2.70	1.80

Note. Scale responses range from 1 (not descriptive) to 5 (very descriptive).

What are differences across disciplines (colleges) in how instructors perceive they are creating engagement and building community? Items for the two sub-scales were averaged to create sub-scale scores for engagement and for community. Because of the small numbers of instructor responses as well as the similarity of disciplines and convergence of means, the six colleges were grouped into two larger groups for further analysis. Agriculture, Education, and Health Sciences formed one group; Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering formed the second group. A one-way ANOVA was conducted using the two sub-scales as dependent variables and the college group in which the course was offered as the independent variable. Tests of significance were conducted at the .05 level and both tests yielded significant differences by college group. When the course was in Agriculture, Education, or Health Sciences, instructors described themselves as facilitating a significantly stronger classroom community ($F = 12.26$, $p = .001$) and student engagement ($F = 19.47$, $p = <.001$) among students than when courses were delivered in Arts and Sciences, Business, or Engineering (see Table 3 below for means and standard deviations).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for Engagement Scale Items in Rank Order*

Item	M	SD
Believe students expect a fair grade	4.83	.38
Course structured so students can stay caught up	4.79	.47
Make material meaningful for students	4.76	.48
Course is well organized	4.68	.52
Course designed for students to be well organized	4.55	.64
Encourage student effort	4.49	.68
Provide student reminders	4.34	1.04
Believe student capacity for learning can be affected by class experiences	4.28	.91
Design activities to build student confidence	3.76	1.27
Believe most students expect to earn an A	3.45	1.35
Create course materials (technology) to motivate students	3.44	1.48

Note. Scale responses range from 1 (not descriptive) to 5 (very descriptive).

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Community and Engagement by College*

	N	M	SD
Community			
Agriculture, Education, Health Sciences	23	4.14	.34
Arts & Sciences, Business, Engineering	17	3.60	.61
Engagement			
Agriculture, Education, Health Sciences	23	4.51	.33
Arts & Sciences, Business, Engineering	17	4.04	.34

Note. Scale ranged from 1 (not descriptive) to 5 (very descriptive).

What are the differences in perceptions of creating engagement and building community online between male and female instructors? There was a significant difference between male and female instructors' perceptions of building community online; female instructors perceived a significantly stronger sense of community than males ($F = 4.62$, $p = .038$). There was no significant difference between males and females on perceptions of engagement ($F = 2.32$, $p = .137$). (See Table 4 below for means and standard deviations).

In summary, instructors delivering courses in Agriculture, Education and in Health Sciences, all three educating students in the helping professions, reported that they created environments to encourage classroom community and student engagement more than instructors teaching in Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering. Additionally, female instructors reported stronger perceptions of building community than did males.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Community and Engagement by Gender*

	N	M	SD
Community			
Male	15	3.68	.54
Female	24	4.04	.51
Engagement			
Male	15	4.19	.43
Female	24	4.39	.38

Note. Scale ranged from 1 (not descriptive) to 5 (very descriptive).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings of this study indicate that instructors' perceived high levels of community building and engagement in online classes, similar to Seok, Kinsell, DaCosta, and Tung (2010). Relative to community building, instructors reported they communicated clear guidelines and enforced them, encouraged student contact, expected students to interact frequently in discussions, and worked hard to create connections with their students. Instructors made sure the course rules are clear, and they reported they are consistent in enforcing course rules. To enhance engagement in their students' learning, instructors perceived that students expected to be treated fairly, their courses were well-organized, material was created to be intentionally meaningful for students, they encouraged students to give a great deal of effort to their learning, and that students' experiences in class could actually change their capacity for learning. Instructors' perceptions of how they create an online community of learners and support student engagement in their learning were surprisingly very positive.

In prior research, such as Young and Bruce (2011), students were surveyed in a similar way and were not as positive about instructors yet they did identify similar characteristics of community and engagement. Students, according to Young and Bruce (2011), and instructors in the present study both identify student contact with instructor, personal connections among students, and organization as critical for a positive online learning environment. A very positive finding in the present study is that instructors strategically and purposefully designed activities to engage students and to build community. Instructors seemed to put forth effort to create community and engagement and appeared to be cognizant of the benefits to students.

However, with the ever-emerging new technologies, instructors must take advantage of the newest educational medium to enhance student learning when the instructor and students are physically separated. Professional development and ongoing instructor support must be provided to keep instructors knowledgeable and competent in using the latest technology. With the number of online course offerings and programs exponentially increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2011), competition seems to be fierce among institutions. Reputation for the latest and best may determine successful higher education programs with long term staying power that nurture students for success.

Recommendations for future studies include surveying instructors and students in the same courses to determine if there is truly a gap between what the instructors believe they are doing

to enhance community and engagement, and what the students perceive is taking place in their classes. Additionally, personal interviews with instructors who, according to students, are exemplars in creating community and promoting engagement, might shed more light on these important characteristics of online learning communities.

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