

The Feeling of and Desire for Sense of Community among Online Graduate Students

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Abstract

Although sense of community has been studied widely, there is a paucity of research focusing on this concept in online graduate students in particular. The purpose of this brief report was to understand the degree to which sense of community was experienced and desired among online graduate students. An electronic instrument was administered to online graduate students to assess their feelings and desire for sense of community in the online courseroom. It was determined that they generally did not feel a sense of community; however, they generally did not desire it either. Given that this study represents a first step in the line of research on sense of community among online graduate students, directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: online learning; distance education; sense of community; online student perceptions; student success

Many undergraduate and graduate students over the age of 30 years are opting to take a less traditional route to pursuing their education and completing their degrees online (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). With more than 6.7 million students enrolled in distance-education courses in the United States in 2012, enrollment is at an all-time high (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The average age of online students is 33 years, and the majority of these students are women who also work a full-time job and would otherwise be unable to pursue a degree (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

Although online education can increase access to educational opportunities for people who might not normally be able to pursue them, the non-completion rate in distance education is increasing more rapidly than it is in traditional education (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2010). Despite the challenges associated with distance education, students continue to enroll in

online graduate programs because they want to advance their education while working (Ouzts, 2006). More research is needed on this potentially unique population of students to better understand how to aid them in becoming successful. Relatedly, increasing the course completion rate among online students is critical to the survival and success of distance-education programs (Bocchi et al., 2010).

Researchers (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2013; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Bocchi et al., 2010; Drouin, 2008) have examined various factors, including sense of community, with the goal of increasing the completion rate and lowering the dropout rate among online students (Ouzts, 2006). Sense of community has been found to correlate with better learning outcomes and other measures of academic success (Abedin, Daneshgar, & D'Ambra, 2010; Dawson, 2006; Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Lamport & Bartolo, 2012; Rovai, 2002b).

However, results of research are mixed with regard to the extent to which online graduate students prefer or desire a sense of community (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004) as well as the degree of its impact on their academic performance (Picciano, 2002).

Sense of Community

Although researchers use varying definitions of sense of community, there is a general consensus that the term reflects a sense of connectedness, cohesion, and interdependence (Rovai, 2002a). A sense of community can be created through course design and instruction (Sher, 2009). It is not developed solely among the group of students in any particular course; it may also be created by student-instructor interactions (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Sher, 2009). Sher reported that both student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions play a critical role in student satisfaction with online courses. Rovai (2002b) stated that the

quality and quantity of interactions also impact students' sense of community. Therefore, it appears that students need to put in the time and effort to foster such interactions for there to be a positive impact on learning, instead of completing minimum discussion requirements (Picciano, 2002).

Although many researchers have examined sense of community in online students, much of the previous literature is limited by the examination of traditional universities with online courses versus online universities with solely online courses (e.g., Abedin et al., 2010; Drouin, 2008). Lampton and Bartolo (2012) surveyed 11 postgraduate education students at an online university and found that an increased sense of community led to student retention and better-quality programs. However, future research to include a greater number of students in more programs at additional online universities is needed, as it is possible that the students in the study were not

representative of all online graduate students (Drouin, 2008). Furthermore, an examination of the degree to which its importance to strictly online graduate students is associated with their success in the online courseroom is warranted (Drouin, 2008).

Purpose

The purpose of this brief report was to examine the general feeling of and desire for sense of community among online graduate students. This brief report was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do online graduate students feel a sense of community?
2. To what extent do online graduate students desire a sense of community?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of adult online graduate students at a regionally accredited online university with an enrollment of nearly 10,000 students. All graduate students who were enrolled in various online

courses at the university were invited to participate to enhance the representativeness and the size of the sample. Ultimately, 535 graduate students voluntarily completed the instrument developed for this brief report. Of those students, 22 (4.0%) reported that their online course was delivered in a synchronous format, 395 (73.9%) responded that it was presented in an asynchronous format, and 118 (22%) indicated that it was delivered in both a synchronous and an asynchronous (hybrid) format. The average age of participants was 45 years ($SD = 12.6$). Of the 535 participants, 385 (72%) were female and 150 (28%) were male.

In regard to perceived academic performance, most participants reported that they expected to receive a high grade in their current online courses. Specifically, 88% of them indicated that they expected to receive an A, with the average anticipated course grade being 3.91 out of 4 ($SD = 0.38$). This expected course grade was slightly higher

than their mean reported GPA ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .23$).

Materials

Students' perceived sense of community was measured using the Online Course Survey developed by Drouin (2008). The instrument included 15 questions (5 with true/false responses and 10 with responses on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)). These questions were related to the students' experiences in the online courseroom; interactions with peers and instructors; and desire to enroll in future online courses.

Individual item scores were summed to produce a single composite score as recommended by Drouin (2008). There is evidence that the OCS is valid and reliable for use with online students, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89 (Drouin, 2008). Additional demographic questions were added by the researcher to obtain

information about each participant's sex, age, current grade point average, course delivery method (synchronous/asynchronous), and expected grade in the current course.

Procedure

Before participants were contacted, approval was obtained from the institutional review board and appropriate representatives of the selected university. Then, a posting was placed on a student forum of the university's website inviting students to participate in the electronic survey by clicking the included link. There was also an explanation of how the findings might improve online education. Individuals who decided to participate were asked to review and sign a form to indicate their informed consent before completing the instrument. Individuals who volunteered were then granted access to the questionnaire via SurveyMonkey. All participants were assigned randomly generated identification

numbers to ensure that their individual responses could not be linked back to them (Czaja & Blair, 2005). A total of 623 students responded, although only 535 were completed in their entirety. Individuals were not offered any incentive for their participation. Once the data were exported into SPSS, descriptive statistics were calculated.

Results

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this brief report, general trends and descriptive statistics are presented. Of the 535 participants in the sample, 414 (77%) reported that they did not believe that they shared a sense of community with their classmates, whereas 121 (23%) reported that they did.

Most participants reported that they were unable to discuss and debate issues related to class topics with their classmates often. Specifically, 286 (53%) indicated that they never discussed or debated issues with

their classmates, whereas 116 (22%) reported that they rarely did. However, 31 (6%) participants said that they often discussed and debated class topics with their classmates. Only 27 (5%) reported that they always discussed and debated issues with their classmates. Among the respondents, 75 (14%) chose not to respond to this question.

When asked to provide details about opportunities to create relationships among the students, participants reported that their online courses generally did not offer them. Specifically, 225 (42%) reported that they never had an opportunity to communicate with or get to know their classmates, whereas 168 (31%) indicated that they rarely had an opportunity to do so. However, 77 (14%) reported that they sometimes were able to establish relationships with their classmates. In addition, 36 (7%) reported that they often were able to establish these relationships, and 29 (6%) reported that they always could.

Participants were also asked to estimate the number of posts that they contributed to the online discussion board for their current class. This was done to begin to understand the level of engagement in the online course. Participants reported that they contributed an average of 1.1 posts ($SD = 0.45$) per week.

Despite the finding that most students did not experience a sense of community and contributed to a limited extent via postings in their courses, 430 (80%) participants indicated that the online course was appealing to them, whereas 105 (20%) stated that it was not. Further, when asked whether they would enroll in another online learning course, 521 (97%) of them reported that they would, with only 14 (3%) indicating that they would not.

Discussion

The majority of participants in this brief report were learning asynchronously, which allowed for little synchronous

interaction among them. Email, chatrooms, and class discussions allow students to communicate questions to other students as well as the instructor and to respond to the questions of others (Sher, 2009). This type of interaction is critical to the creation of a sense of community (Drouin, 2008); however, students have to be motivated to build it (Picciano, 2002). When a course is delivered asynchronously, students do not necessarily have the same pressures to respond to faculty members and peers as they do in a course that is delivered synchronously, which could also hinder the establishment of a sense of community in the online courseroom (Drouin, 2008).

In this brief report, participants reported that their online courses did not allow for student interaction in the discussion forums. More research is needed to understand if this was a course design issue, a curriculum issue, or perhaps a student perceptions issue to begin to address

potential communication breakdowns. It is difficult for students to feel any type of a sense of community in the online courseroom if they do not interact with their peers (Drouin, 2008; Nistor & Neuauer, 2010; Ritke-Jones & Merys, 2010). However, students have been found to misperceive the frequency of peer interaction, suggesting that researchers should be cautious in how they interpret student reports of online interaction (Picciano, 2002).

Discussion boards are frequently used in online courses to promote student interaction with other students and instructors (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Lee & Choi, 2013; Soen & Davidovitch, 2008) as well as to enhance course content (Lee & Choi, 2013). Regardless of the format of online course delivery, nearly all of the participants in this brief report stated that they did not feel a sense of community in the online courseroom. They reportedly

engaged in limited peer interaction or discussion. According to Sher (2009), a sense of community is created both within the group of students in a particular course and by student and instructor interactions. Given the minimal online discussion reported by the participants in this brief report, future researchers might examine the quality and quantity of as well as the participants in online discussions.

Future research examining sense of community in strictly online graduate students in general and online doctoral students in particular would benefit from including both perceived and actual academic performance indicators. The majority of participants reported that they expected to earn an A in their online course. However, most participants also reported that they did not feel a sense of community in their online courses. With the majority of students expecting high grades and not feeling a sense of community, it is possible

that sense of community in the online graduate courseroom might not be as important to academic success as previously suggested (Nistor & Neuauer, 2010; Ritke-Jones & Merys, 2010; Sadera et al., 2009; Wang, 2008). However, it is also possible that the students' expectations might not have been aligned with the actual grade earned. Future researchers might also further examine students' performance expectations, with an emphasis on online graduate students, who might be accustomed to performing well, given their career status and academic performance to have gotten them this far.

Merys (2010) found that the lack of discussion board use to interact with peers and discuss course topics may significantly reduce the options available to students, especially those who are uncertain or struggling with course content or material. This reduction can contribute to a diminished sense of community and

influence students not to enroll in additional courses. However, in this brief report, the majority of students reported minimal interaction with peers and in discussion boards. Yet, many of them reportedly had a desire to enroll in another online course. As noted previously, the majority of online graduate students are older and work in full-time positions (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). Perhaps the need for flexibility in obtaining a degree outweigh other factors, such as a need for a sense of community (Ouzts, 2006). Given the unique characteristics of these students, additional research is warranted to understand their academic, personal, and social needs as they relate to successful degree completion.

In an evaluation of three online sections of a psychology course at one university, Drouin (2008) did not find an association between a strong sense of community and student success.

Furthermore, Herbert (2013) showed that

motivation, rather than sense of community, might be critical to success in online courses. It might be the case for the participants in this brief report as well. However, further research is needed to examine these trends among online graduate students.

Several limitations should be considered when examining the preliminary findings presented in this brief report. Only descriptive statistics were presented as the first step in this line of research, so any conclusions should be tentative. Further, data were obtained from graduate students at one completely online university. It is possible that students who volunteered were more extreme in their feelings and/or desire for sense of community than online graduate students in general. It is also possible that students at that one online university are not representative of the larger population of online graduate students. Moreover, there might be important differences between

master's and doctoral students that were not captured by including both types of students in one online graduate student sample.

In general, the results of this research do not appear to align with much of the existing research regarding sense of community in online learning (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Caspi et al., 2008; Daymont & Blau, 2008; Soen & Davidovitch, 2008). A high percentage of participants responded that they intended to enroll in additional courses, indicating that influences other than sense of community might influence online student persistence. It is possible that older students or graduate students do not require a sense of community to be successful in the online learning environment, whereas other students might. It is also possible that older graduate students might tend to be more disciplined or determined to be successful, so they might be able to succeed, even when a sense of community is not present in the online courseroom. Investigating under

which conditions students desire a sense of community, rather than assuming that they do and that it is associated with important

outcomes, might also enhance the research and practice of online graduate education.

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