“That’s Cheating:” Students’ Perceptions of Peer-to-Peer Interactions that Weaken a Sense of Community in an Online Learning Environment

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Abstract: Although, online learning has become more popular in recent years, it has endured high dropout rates. These rates have been linked to the physical separation of students, lack of interaction, miscommunication and feelings of alienation. The goal of the current research was to more deeply understand this phenomenon. Our research identifies specific types of interactions that weaken students’ sense of community and lead to feelings of isolation and alienation in an online learning environment. We describe seven specific types of peer-to-peer interactions that negatively affect students’ online learning experience and cause them to disconnect from their peers and the course.

Objectives

In recent years, online learning has become more attractive to learners mainly due to its convenience of allowing them to access the online learning environment (OLE) at any time and from any place. This flexibility enables learners to work at their own pace according to their work and family responsibilities (Bolliger & Inan, 2012). Furthermore, studies have also emphasized that unlike face-to-face courses there is no need for turn-taking online because everyone can contribute and participate in more than one discussion (Hammond, 1999), offering a venue for exploring various ideas (Hiltz, 1986). This access gives learners the opportunity to digest these ideas and reflect on their own understanding before publicly sharing their own perspectives (Hewitt, 2005). Such benefits of online learning have contributed to its growth and popularity amongst learners.

Although online learning is appealing in many respects, it also has problems. Historically, online learning has suffered from high dropout rates (Carr, 2005). The physical separation of students (Rovai, 2002a) and lack of interaction between them (Carr, 2000) have been attributed to the problems with attrition. According to Rovai (2002b) “such [physical] separation has a tendency to reduce the sense of community, giving rise to feelings of disconnection, isolation, distraction, and lack of personal attention” (p.2). Furthermore, some researchers suggest that isolation and disconnectedness are the main reasons students drop out of online courses (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006).
The current research was concerned with some of the factors that cause students to feel isolated and disconnected from their peers in an online course. Specifically, the following research question is explored:

- What types of interactions weaken a sense of community in an OLE? How do they affect learning?

Over the past year, we have conducted a study to explore students’ sense of community in OLEs. In a section of this study, we focused on the kinds of interactions that weaken a sense of community in an online course. With this particular focus, we hope to further understand how and why students become isolated or disconnected from their online peers.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study employed a social constructivist perspective, which proposes that learning takes place through interaction and collaboration with others. This theory suggests that new understandings emerge as learners work to negotiate meaning – a process that involves both articulating one’s own ideas and trying to make sense of ideas that others express (Richardson, 2003). In the context of online courses, such processes may be nurtured through the development of a class-wide community (Song & McNary, 2011), characterized by a sense of trust, commonality and interactivity. Creating a community is thought to foster deeper thinking among students (Hulon, 2013) and lead to better student outcomes (Drouin, 2008). When a supportive community is developed, students are likely to interact more often with each other, build camaraderie and engage in social reinforcement (Conrad, 2005), which helps to minimize any feelings of isolation and disconnection online learners may experience.

Interaction is extremely important in fostering a sense of community among students, however some studies suggest that certain types of interactions could also weaken students’ sense of community. This is likely to happen when students struggle to find appropriate ways to communicate with each other and unknowingly trigger feelings of isolation and alienation among some of their peers (Zembylas, 2008). For example, a student might post a note in a discussion forum, hoping for a response, but not receiving one, leading them to think that their note has been ignored or that their response was not valuable. This sequence of events leads to feelings of isolation and alienation. Some studies suggest that such feelings weaken students’ sense of community, reinforce a negative online learning experience, and contribute to the high drop out rates in online learning (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Interestingly, in a study conducted by Rovai and Wighting (2005) it was discovered that alienation and a sense of community have an inverse relationship. This can occur in several different ways. First, students’ sense of community will weaken and the feeling of alienation will strengthen if they do not have the feeling of belonging. Secondly, if a learner’s cultural and personal beliefs contradict or clash with the perceived beliefs of the community, it will weaken their sense of community because they will see themselves as different from their peers. Students come to believe (perhaps falsely) that if they share their beliefs publicly, others would ignore, reject or devalue
them. If instructors and students are unaware of the factors and processes that can weaken a sense of community, they run the risk of unintentionally alienating others.

**Methods and Data Sources**

This qualitative study focuses on graduate students’ sense of community in online courses at a major North American university. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with six graduate students who had taken online courses. These interviews allowed the researchers to gain a better understanding of the types of interactions that weakened a sense of community for these students. The online courses taken by the students all occurred over a 12-week period in an online learning environment called Pepper. Interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory thematic analysis approach to help explain which specific interactions were causing students to feel isolated, alienated, and disconnected from their peers. The themes from each student’s interview transcript were compared, providing the main themes across interviews, which illustrated the interactions students believed weakened a sense of community.

**Results**

**Research Question:** What interactions weaken a sense of community in an OLE? How do they affect learning?

Students’ semi-structured interviews revealed seven themes of peer-to-peer interactions that weaken a sense of community in an OLE. These themes were labeled: the keener, being overly nice, ignoring online notes, not giving credit, going on tangents, editing notes, and cultural exclusion.

**The keener.** According to participants the keener in an OLE refers to a peer who responds to everything quickly and constantly, including discussions they are not a part of. Although fellow students are happy that their peers are excited about the course, many expressed becoming frustrated and annoyed when their peers were too involved in online discussions because they tended to dominate the discourse and drown out other voices.

**Being overly nice.** Due to the limited social cues available in online learning environments, participants indicated that they would often use friendly and positive language in hopes of not sounding offensive. However, participants indicated that some of their peers would be overly nice constantly using phrases such as, “it was so wonderful to read your post” or “thanks very much for posting.” Such phrases sounded fake and were sometimes interpreted as insincere to others.

**Ignoring online notes.** Many instructors offer participation marks to motivate students to participate in these discussions. For participants these notes are needed to share resources, negotiate ideas, and learn from each other’s experiences. Some students felt that not responding to a peer’s online note was disrespectful. Participants emphasized that having their note ignored by their peers, or seeing other peers’ notes being ignored, meant that these notes were not valuable and not needed, which was hurtful.
Not giving credit. Sometimes keeping track of who said what in a discussion forum is difficult and may lead to repetitive ideas within notes. Some participants felt upset when one of their ideas was re-introduced into a discussion without crediting them. They also noted that not giving credit to others takes away that much needed feeling of validation.

Going on tangents. Although, some participants looked forward to reading their peers’ online notes, others hinted that doing so was sometimes frustrating. This feeling of frustration stemmed from peers going on tangents in their notes. This might take the form of discussing something that did not relate to the topic or venting about an event or situation. Participants emphasized that these tangents were distracting and as a result many students would opt to leave the conversation and simply move on to another.

Editing notes. In the online learning environment Pepper, students have the option of editing their notes at any time. For participants, this feature allows them to correct any typos or grammatical errors after the note is posted publicly. Participants for whom English is a second language indicated that this feature was extremely helpful when writing. However, editing content in a note after a peer posted a reply could raise problems. “That’s cheating” as one participant declared, in reference to a note that was edited in such a way that the reply now seemed irrelevant and erroneous. Many participants felt that such interactions made the discussions awkward and decided not to communicate with peers who engaged in such behaviors.

Cultural exclusion. All participants expressed enjoyment when reading about their peers’ personal experiences, more so, when it related to the course content because it offered a new perspective to understand and explore the topic. Unfortunately, some participants felt reluctant to discuss their cultural experiences because they did not know how to share such experiences. They feared not fitting in, or being misunderstood. This assumption caused some participants to emotionally disconnect from the course and feel as though they did not contribute fully to the online discussions.

Scholarly Significance
In a traditional classroom-based course, many instructors have an idea of what types of interactions and strategies help meet learning objectives and support students’ academic and social needs. However, teaching online is different and some instructors may struggle with sorting out what strategies and interactions are effective in an OLE. Face-to-face teaching approaches may be less effective and beneficial online (Horspool & Lange, 2012). If instructors are able to understand which interactions lead to the feelings of isolation and alienation they could then counter such interactions by modifying their instruction and providing the appropriate support to maintain a strong sense of community among students, thus possibly minimizing the high attrition rates. Our research has identified some specific peer-to-peer interactions that lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and disconnection, eventually breaking down a sense of community for some students. Furthermore, our participants indicated that negative
interactions with others affected their learning by causing them to avoid participation in the discussions. Efforts to ignore these negative peer-to-peer interactions will only make it difficult for online instructors to provide a positive online learning experience for students. Therefore, we argue that it is important for instructors to find ways, perhaps using their “powerful strategies, technologies, and skillsets” to counter and raise awareness of such negative interactions to further support student engagement (Oakes, Welner & Renee, 2015, para 7). We believe that doing so will “foster a democratic and public solving of these problems,” in our case negative peer-to-peer interactions, among students and maintain a class-wide sense of community of trust, commonality, and interactivity (Oakes et al., 2015, para 7).
References


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