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“On the Boards”: A Study of Community and Collaboration in an Online Course

Just moments after hanging up on my phone interview, I almost called back to say I'd changed my mind. When I applied for the teaching assistantship, I figured that I would make the hour and twenty minute commute twice a week to the university where I had enrolled in an M.Ed program. I could handle that for a semester. During the interview, the Director of Composition suggested he might be able to arrange for me to teach online. I had come to the program with four years experience teaching college-level writing courses, so the director suggested the online experience might present a new learning experience for me--a chance to challenge myself as a teacher. Although I would love to say that my main reason for not calling him back was a desire to challenge myself, the hour and twenty minute trip was most prominent in my mind. Like many of the students who choose to enroll in online classes, my packed teaching and course schedule, distance from the institution, and commitment to my family heavily influenced my decision to teach online.

My hesitancy had much to do with the same experience that the Director felt made me qualified to teach the course. When people ask why I have chosen to pursue a career in teaching, I usually say that I love the classroom because it is where I have experienced the most thrilling moments of realization and faced some of the most humbling moments of failure as I interact with students. I love being with students, working together to make sense of our reading, writing, and experience of the world. I was worried about how the move from a physical classroom to an online Course Management System (CMS) would affect my sense of connection to and interaction with students. Months before the course began, I started

researching ways that community could be promoted in online courses, hoping to design a course that would develop the community I see as essential to teaching writing and to learning in general.

I taught this online course, EN 1200: Composition, for Plymouth State University in the Fall of 2012. As the PSU's webpage says, "Plymouth State University is a regional comprehensive university offering a rich, student-focused learning environment with an enrollment of approximately 4,300 undergraduate and approximately 3,000 graduate students." PSU has begun to invest heavily in online education, and recently re-launched its Frost School of Continuing Studies as the Division of Online and Continuing Education.

However, online learning is not limited to continuing studies or graduate studies at PSU; traditional undergraduate students are allowed to enroll in a number of online courses during the regular academic year. Traditional undergraduates can take online classes while living on campus as residential students, which was the case for 10 of the 16 students enrolled in my course.

Over the course of the semester, many questions arose for me. As more and more students dropped out of the course, one main question emerged among the rest: What are factors that lead to success or failure in online courses? In an attempt to answer this question, I designed the following study. Yet as I began my research and read more about the number of students who are dissatisfied by online courses, that question began to evolve: What can students' perspectives of online courses tell us about the success or failure of a course?

Literature Review

According to Regina L. Graza Mitchell, success in online courses can be measured

through four types of assessment: stakeholder perceptions, quantifiable elements, course design, and external standards. Currently, quantifiable elements (completion rates, attrition rates, grades) are the most common form of assessment and determiners of success. In my own course, the completion rate was 50% (8 out of 16 students completed). All eight students who completed the course passed, and the grade breakdown for the semester was 2 As, 1 A-, 2 B+, 1 B-, 1 C+, 1 D. Generally speaking, the completion rate of my face-to-face (f2f) courses is much higher. In the same semester that I taught this online course, I taught two writing courses at a local community college, and the pass rate was 75% (12 out of 16 students passing) and 83% (15 out of 18 students passing). Completion rates were the same as passing rates in both courses, and the grade spread was higher (no student in either section of my f2f courses received below a C). Because I steadily lost more students from the online course during the semester, I wondered why the completion rate was so much lower in the online course and how failing students themselves might account for their departure. Quantifiable elements thus lead me to questions about stakeholder perceptions of the course as well as course design (how students perceived the collaborative/interactive course).

There is a spectrum of approaches to course design, with two approaches sitting on opposite sides of the spectrum: objectivism and constructivism. Charalambos Vrasidas describes the differences between these two educational philosophies and the ways they affect course design online. Objectivists believe “there is one *true* and *correct* reality, which we can come to know following the objective methods of science” (3). Traditional methods of education are based on this philosophy, whereby “instruction should be designed to effectively transfer the objective knowledge into the learner’s head” (3). The most valued forms of

interaction from an objectivist perspective are learner-teacher and learner-content.

Objectivists do not see value in learner-learner interaction because learners do not yet know the objective knowledge (5). Evaluation in objectivist courses is based on student performance in assessments intended to measure to what extent the “*true* and *correct* reality” is mapped into student’s minds. Thus grades are a quantifiable measure of success.

Constructivists do not view knowledge as independent of the learner but as constructed by the learner. An individual’s reality is “created in the mind through interaction with the world and is based on interpretation” (7). Central to this perspective is Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Quoting Vygotsky, Vrasidas defines the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (10). Consequently, learner-learner interaction is essential to the constructivist perspective. Course activities connected with this approach online include “student reflection papers, student participation in online discussions, student moderation of online discussions, student reflective journals, weekly assignments, team projects, student presentations, observations and interviews with students, and student evaluations of their peers’ work” (11). Constructivists tend to encourage multiple perspectives and approaches to problem solving, and thus use multiple types of assessment to measure learning (11). Constructivist also tend to be “more concerned with assessing the knowledge construction process and not as much concerned with assessing knowledge” when it comes to evaluation (11).

I designed my course according to constructivist pedagogy. My own teaching philosophy aligns with this view; as a writing teacher, my philosophy is best summarized by what Irene Ward calls a “functional dialogism for composition.” Functional dialogism posits that learning to write “takes place best through an interactive, dialogic process.” This is because of “the dialogic nature of communicative processes themselves” (169). In other words, writing is a form of dialogue, and for students to grow and become competent writers, they must come to understand the dialogic nature of writing and participate in dialogue and meaning construction. Due to my philosophy of teaching writing, success in this course would be in part determined by whether or not students had come to understand the collaborative process as central to their growth as writers and learners.

One of the biggest proponents of the constructivist approach is Alfred P. Rovai, who has published multiple books and articles theorizing the constructivist approach online and suggesting ways to implement it. I read multiple works by Rovai prior to designing my course and used many of the teaching strategies he suggests. Rovai et al. confirm student retention models (retention being a quantifiable element) that emphasize social and educational integration into institutional life as indicator of persistence and success (which is measured through stakeholder perceptions). To achieve this social and academic integration, Rovai et al. emphasize the necessity of fostering a learning community in online classes, as “A strong sense of community largely reflects a socializing experience based on a holistic approach to education that values individuality, not one that focuses on mass delivery of skill-based instruction” (364). They recommend pedagogies emerging from Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning theory, which they explain, “suggests social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of

cognition” (364). This translates into using “teaching in context that might be personally meaningful to students, negotiating shared meanings with students, class discussion, and small group collaboration” in order to “nurture a sense of community and increase student-institutional fit” (365). From Rovai et al.’s perspective, success is achieved through a specific course design that leads to a meaningful community for stakeholders that helps facilitate learning.

Even though Rovai et al. suggest that the socioacultural/constructivist approach can foster a learning community in online classes, the same study cited above also found that online students are much less likely to feel a community develops in their courses than f2f students. Likewise, Terre Allen’s research indicates that student retention is tightly bound up in their perceived social experience in classes. Allen found that students in online courses are much more likely to feel distanced from classmates and the instructor, and once a feeling of distance emerges for online students, it is extremely difficult for them to overcome that feeling because of the online, asynchronous nature of the course. Overall, studies like these suggest academic and social integration into class communities and institutions is more difficult for online students than for f2f students.

Despite pedagogies and tools emerging to help increase the interactivity between participants in online courses, this interaction is still mediated by technology. Claire Howell Major’s study examines the effects of this at-a-distance, asynchronous, computer-mediated shift on faculty’s perceptions of online courses. This study can provide insight into the ways that the shift might also affect students as well as provide a model of the type of information that can be found through stakeholder perceptions. Major’s study resulted in five major

findings: 1. Faculty often change their public presentation of self, becoming more reserved online; 2. Faculty feel professionally rejuvenated through teaching online; 3. Faculty increase structure in online courses; 4. Faculty assume additional responsibilities when teaching online; 5. Faculty feel increased time demands when teaching online.

More specifically, faculty reported that their change in presentation of self resulted in their becoming more like mentors or guides to students than deliverers of a body of knowledge (essentially, a shift from objectivist to constructivist teaching). Faculty also report becoming more formal online because of what they felt was a greater sense of accountability: their responses were posted and visible to all students, and as such, faculty needed to be careful about what they said and how they said it. The asynchronous nature of the course also allowed them to consider their responses to students longer, and the wait-time resulted in a more formal response. Finally, faculty felt the above shifts could result in their being more reserved online than f2f.

In addition to the shift in faculty presentation, faculty indicated a need to renegotiate their relationship to their students, which was noted in a number of ways. First, faculty felt that they needed to reconstruct their professional status with students. Faculty were no longer the automatic authority in the course, and often times they felt they needed to remind students they were involved and “present.” Because faculty and students never saw each other in a physical sense, faculty reported feeling freed from student preconceptions and preconceptions they have of students. Yet this lack of seeing students also resulted in faculty feeling that they had a harder time building relationships with students because of the loss of nonverbal tools. Some faculty noted feeling as if the lack of synchronous conversation resulted in “shallow

exchanges.” Misunderstandings were more difficult to clear up online, resulting in stress and frustration over the handling of issues which arose during the course. Many faculty noted that online communication could not replace sensory, f2f relationships with students and stated that they missed seeing and interacting with students.

Studies of students’ perceptions of online classes also seem to suggest that the move to computer-mediated communication presents problems for their learning. Dennis Bristow et al. found through their survey of 800 college students that 32% of students who had taken one or more online classes viewed online courses as an extremely poor educational choice, plus an additional 18.2% responded that taking an online class is a somewhat poor educational choice. Together, that is approximately 50% of the students who had experience taking online courses who found the choice to be a poor one. Their study also found that students who had taken online courses tended to have a more negative view of online courses than students who had not taken classes online.

Students indicate that this negative view emerges from the lack of contact with classmates and instructor. Gina G. Berridge et al.’s survey of online students found that students had largely chosen an online course for convenience (flexibility in schedule; ability to do course work from home). Some students in the study reported that online courses could provide extra time to think through complex issues and to move through course materials at their own pace, aiding their educational experience. But the majority of students also pointed to the asynchronous, at-a-distance nature of their course as a drawback. While online courses allow for flexibility, the lack of regular f2f contact with faculty and classmates also made the experience difficult for them.

Course Design: Implementing Sociocultural/Constructivist Learning Theory

As mentioned earlier, I designed the course based on a constructivist/sociocultural approach. I describe the course design below in order to illustrate the ways in which I attempted to foster a learning community during the class and facilitate learner-learner and learner-instructor interaction.

The course was conducted over the CMS Moodle. It was fully online and almost entirely asynchronous, except for individual writing conferences conducted over Gmail chat. Each week, the class engaged in 2-3 discussions conducted on Moodle's discussion boards. Each discussion centered on a different group of readings, writing exercises, or workshop of students' writing. While workshops were conducted differently, discussions of readings and writing exercises involved similar requirements over the semester. On these boards, students began the week by writing a longer post (beginning around 150-200 words and increasing over the semester to 400+ words). After the initial post, students were then required to respond to at least 2 other students' posts (a total of approximately 4-6 responses a week). After the first 4 weeks of the semester, students were expected to reply to at least 2-3 responses, continuing the discussion generated through the initial response.

To support students as they learned how to approach these discussion board posts, responses, and replies to responses, I posted links to overviews of how to engage in online course discussions, modeled these strategies in my own posts, and emailed students informal assessments of their participation on the discussion boards. Some readings involved specific group projects while others engaged students in a whole class discussion. I participated in the

course as a co-learner and guide, posting longer responses to readings and responding to students' posts.

Peer workshops were also conducted over the discussion boards. Students would post their weekly draft of the longer essay we were working on. I would provide a general framework for the workshop, and students would write each other responses to their drafts based on the framework. Workshops were the least successful portion of the course, and I ended up having to step in to do the work of students who did not post responses to their partners' draft. Several students repeatedly posted drafts of their papers, received feedback, yet did not post feedback for their partners even after I had contacted them multiple times in an attempt to prompt their full participation in the process.

In order to make myself available to students, I offered office hours every week and conducted one-on-one writing conferences with students over Gmail's chat feature. In addition to regularly scheduled office hours, I also told students that they were able to contact me whenever Gmail showed me as "available to chat," and I would often make myself available to students during the day and the evening while I was reading through drafts of student papers or doing other course-related work. One aspect of the gmail chat feature is the ability to see when contacts are also available to chat. Despite seeing my students on gmail quite often through this feature, there was only one instance of a student contacting me outside of mandatory conferences over the whole of the semester. I also conducted conferences for three of the four major papers in the course via gmail chat. These conferences were mandatory and factored into students grades on those papers (as a completion grade). All students participated in these conferences, which typically lasted 45 minutes.

Methodology

Data collection for this study consisted of two interviews with students from the course. I conducted these interviews over Gmail chat. The first student stopped posting on the discussion boards and failed the course; and the second student completed and fully participated in the course.

Interviews

The first student, Eric, dropped out of the course during Week 8. During the first eight weeks, he rarely posted on the discussion boards and handed in only a couple of drafts. He did not take part in peer workshops. During the first learner-instructor conference of the semester, Eric told me that he had taken and failed the same course online during the previous academic year. He had wanted to sign up for a f2f section of the class, but was unable to because of his schedule. He has only ever failed these two online composition classes. Otherwise, he is a A/B student at Plymouth State studying physical education.

Becca is also an A/B student at PSU studying biology. She plans to attend medical school and become a pediatrician. Becca plays tennis for PSU, and she decided to take composition online to free part of her schedule for tennis practices and matches. She received an A-, and participated in all but one of the discussion board assignments. She also handed in all assigned drafts and fully participated in all of the peer workshops.

Three major themes emerged through these interviews. First, both students indicated that they began the course with few expectations, but further discussion throughout the interview revealed that they had some type of vision of what an online class would be prior to taking the course. In both cases, this vision was of an objectivist course design. Eric responded

that he “wasn’t too sure” what an online class would entail. “Pretty much what it is I suppose. Doing work and turning it in online.” Eric did not think an online course would require much interaction with other students or instructors, but both of the online composition courses he took required a lot of interaction. As he said, “There was a lot of online forums and such.” On these forums, students would, “Talk about writing. Talk about each other’s writing and other things we read.” The sort of task completion Eric envisioned (and still “pretty much” sees as the design of the course) is independent of a community of learners, aligning with the objectivist perspective.

In Becca’s case, she responded, “I honestly had no idea what I was getting into. None of my friends had ever taken an online course, so honestly I didn’t know what to expect.” She “had no clue [what to expect]. I didn’t know if it would be easier because it was online or harder because I wasn’t actually attending class. I really didn’t know what to expect or how an online class even worked.” Further responses indicated that Becca also came to the course expecting and wanting an objectivist approach. She viewed the online course as successful for her because “I hate sitting through lectures and such because that isn’t how I learn best. I learn best from finding things out on my own.” Becca repeatedly drew our conversation back to a sense that the online course allowed her to learn independently. “I guess I liked our research project. I did it basically all me. I didn’t communicate with other students like I might have if I were to show up to class, and thus I actually did it on my own.” She viewed her learning in the course as connected to her ability to work independently: “I relied on myself, not my peers, which if I look back on some of my other classes, that’s partly why I didn’t do so well.” Overall,

Becca's responses indicate she views learning as something that occurs when individuals interact with course content and tasks, not with other learners.

Second, Eric and Becca had very different views of the role of interaction and dialogue in the online course. Eric did not see the online discussion posts as a viable replacement for f2f discussion. "I don't like online communication much. I find it hard to hold meaningful conversations." When asked to explain why he finds online communication difficult, he pointed to the loss of non-verbal tools that faculty reported in Major's study: "It can be hard to convey what you really mean in a textual conversation. So much of our language is physical. Also other things, like inflections in voice aren't conveyed in forums." He also pointed to the sense of shallowness that faculty in Major's study pointed out: "It's hard for me to engage into a conversation if I feel like I have to read a bunch of bumbling sentences that other students wrote. Honestly, I think some people make themselves seem much less intelligent than they are in places like forums." Eric's comment suggests that he would feel differently about these comments if they occurred in f2f discussion, but because they are posted online, the reader experiences them differently.

Becca also did not seem to feel that much exchange happened between her and her classmates, but she viewed that lack of communication and collaboration as positive. Again, she viewed her independent work on the research paper and relying on herself rather than on her peers as a contributing factor to her success on the project. Whereas Eric viewed the writing on the discussion boards as more "bumbling" than f2f class discussions, Becca saw it as more focused on course content. "In a face-to-face class I noticed some people will bring up different topics that still relate to the course, but in an online class I feel like we just discuss the

topics we are given.” She said this difference could be both positive and negative: “Good because then we are staying on topic and getting through all the stuff we need to know, but on the other hand you could lose out on some interesting facts you might have picked up from the conversation otherwise .” Becca’s focus on “facts” that can be learned from side conversation is telling. She views knowledge as a set of objective facts to learn through a course; consequently, she does not miss the type of “small talk” or personal perspective on course content that Rovai et al. suggest can help build the class learning community. The focus of learning for Becca should be on an individual student learning a prescribed set of content.

When I asked Becca specifically about the role of interaction with her classmates and instructor, Becca talked positively about the experience: “Some [of my peers] were very helpful in giving meaningful feedback...” She also liked one-on-one conferences with me, stating, “I liked how you set up a time each month [for us to talk] with you on Google chat. It gave me a time to check in with you where you could respond asap.” These chat sessions felt more interactive and immediate to her needs than the discussion board posts: “The forum posts were pretty generalized where the chat sessions were just between the two of us.” Interestingly, these interactions with classmates and instructor do not factor into her sense that she completed the research project by herself. For the research project, I emailed Becca feedback on her proposal, preliminary research notes, and two of three drafts. I also conferenced the third draft of the paper via Gmail chat with her. She took part in 3 peer workshops related to that paper as well. Although she seems to have had a positive experience with these forms of interaction and collaboration, she still sees the research project as important for the independent work she did to complete it.

The third and final theme that emerged through these interviews was the role of accountability in the course. Eric pointed out that the lack of physical presence in a classroom made him feel less accountable to his instructor and classmates. While faculty in Major's study reported feeling "more accountable" to students because of the permanence and record of their interactions, Eric seems to feel the reverse happening for him:

While in face-to-face courses you literally see the people in the class on a regular bases. You probably talk to your teacher at least a little bit one-on-one, face-to-face. Well, when you decide to skip a class or not do an assignment, you have to know that you might see the disappointment in your teacher's face when you tell them you [do not have the] homework. Well, I think most people don't really enjoy that feeling. Online it doesn't feel like you are letting anyone down or standing them up."

In his follow up, he stated that online communication feels "emotionless."

Her sense of accountability and responsibility shifted for Becca as well. She was frustrated when students did not post workshop responses or discussion posts on time: "the only drawback [to online interaction] is if people forgot to post on the boards on time. She noted an overall increase in the level of responsibility that students shoulder in an online vs. f2f course, stating, "I feel like [the online class] gives us more responsibility, and how you choose to uphold that determines how difficult you [students] make the course. Meaning if you are responsible then you are going to do the work and such on time thus making the course easier for yourself." Responsibility is again a more individual issue for Becca. She feels accountable to deadlines. She did state, however, that she felt it was easier to keep track of deadlines in f2f

courses: "The only thing I can think of that would be easier [in f2f classes] would be keeping track of deadlines and such. The only drawback of an online class is remembering that you have an online class." Much like to faculty members in Major's study who felt students forgot they existed, Becca forget she was enrolled in an online course. All of this factors into a greater sense of responsibility to deadlines and task completion than to other people.

Discussion

Although proponents of online education believe learning communities can be developed in online courses and that CMS tools can help make courses interactive, the students in my study expected our online course to be transmission-based, and either did not view community or collaboration as important to the learning and writing process or did not see a meaningful learning community develop in the course. For a teacher who views dialogue and collaboration as central to the learning and writing process, I largely felt during the course that it was unsuccessful, and this study confirms to me that my own goals for the course were not met. Paired with a number of other studies of students' perceptions of online education, my own study indicates that computer-mediated communication does not promote community in online courses.

My students' interview responses suggest that being an online student--even in a course designed to be interactive--is a largely isolating experience. For educators who believe interaction and collaboration are central to the learning process, we must further study and question the move toward online education.

Constructivist pedagogy ultimately believes that collaboration helps students expand their knowledge and skill set. Community benefits students by creating an environment

conducive to collaboration. In order to assess the community and collaboration that develops (or not) in online classes, we need to take students' experiences into account. Stakeholder perceptions can illuminate high dropout rates and issues with course design, even when that course design is supposed to be collaborative and community-promoting. Student perspectives can disrupt the sense of success that a quantifiable element like grades seem to indicate. Even if my class had been filled with diligent, hard working students like Becca who always completed assignments and met deadlines, knowing her perspective on the experience leaves me deeply troubled by the understanding of learning she took from the course.

Certainly, f2f students dropout of courses. They can become isolated in their classes and gather from their experience that education is about individual students learning prescribed content. But I think Eric's point about the lack of responsibility and accountability to other people is the difference between the lack of community in his class and the learning community I am able to cultivate in f2f courses. When I take time to read and respond each week to students' papers in f2f classes, they tend to take the time revise their drafts and answer my questions. When students sit across from each other in workshop, they realize that if they don't offer feedback of some form, they are not aiding their partner's writing process.

I've never had a student outright refuse to workshop a classmate's paper in a f2f course, but I watched students in my online class repeatedly accept feedback but offer none. The lack of having to face (or see, or be in the presence of) the person on the receiving end of their feedback may account for this issue. Whatever the case, we need to admit that it is an issue and understand it from students' perspectives in order to address it.

The solution may be, as Rob Jenkins wrote in an article on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website, that we pull back from online education. Speaking of academically struggling students, Jenkins writes, “Maybe they need more f2f interaction with instructors and other students; more conferences in their professors’ offices; more private, one-on-one tutoring sessions; more hanging out with their peers in the student center between classes.”

The way Becca viewed the learning in our online class suggests to me that she needs these things just as much as Eric. We need to be open to answering that all students--and teachers--need these forms of community and collaboration to learn and that online, asynchronous, at-a-distance education cannot offer them.

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