Feeling Connected: 
A Sense of Belonging and Social Presence in an Online Community of Learners 

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ABSTRACT

A sense of belonging is an integral feature of an online community of learners (OCL). This article explores the ways in which digital technologies in an online teacher education programme can facilitate social presence and in turn nurture a sense of belonging in an OCL. A sense of belonging can lower attrition rates in distance programmes that attract learners who are marginalised from on campus education. This can help address issues of social justice by supporting equitable access and participation in higher education. Findings from a qualitative case study indicate the power that digital technologies can have in facilitating social presence and a sense of belonging in an OCL. This study identifies the importance of several factors in this. Firstly, the importance of pedagogical understandings that digital technologies have different affordances in nurturing an OCL, and secondly, that each participant had a different perspective on the affordances of each digital technology in their usefulness for fostering social presence and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Equity, Retention, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

Distance education can provide equitable opportunities for people to access education who might otherwise be disadvantaged and socially excluded through circumstance to attend on campus courses. This includes single-parent families, people with disabilities, people who are geographically remote or people who are mature students that have many commitments such as work and family (Bates, 2005). Online distance programmes have been viewed as a useful medium for increasing participation in higher education for people who have been traditionally excluded (Simpson, 2002). However, once accessing online distance education courses, some people feel isolated and disconnected from their learning institutions and peers, which leads them to withdraw from their programmes (Bates, 2005). This is of key concern because as Simpson comments “without retention the open door offered to disadvantaged students will be a revolving door that ushers them out as fast as they come in” (2005, p. 94). Thus retention of students is pivotal when considering the social justice aspiration of people having “equitable and fair access to resources that are socially valued commodities” (Zajda, Majhanovich & Risi, 2007, p. 10). In this context this aspiration relates to fair access and participation in higher education online distance programmes. However, it seems that some online distance programmes have had limited success in achieving the goal.
of retention and can have high attrition rates (Eynon & Hesper, 2011). One solution to the problem of retaining learners is the development of an online community of learners (OCL) in educational programmes (Salmon, 2006).

It is widely documented that being a member of a community of learners in an education programme is not only essential to the learning process, but can also negate feelings of isolation (Salmon, 2006). Indeed, a learner’s sense of belonging and participation in an OCL can contribute to a sense of connection rather than isolation and motivate learners to stay engaged and successful in their education programmes (Palloff and Pratt, 2003). Consequently, this can help lower attrition rates as learners are retained and engaged in programmes, thus increasing equitable participation in higher education by removing barriers for people who have been traditionally excluded (Leathwood & O, Connell, 2003).

In this paper I examine from a student’s perspective whether and how digital technologies contribute to the development of an online community of learners. In particular, I will focus on how digital technologies facilitate social presence and nurture a sense of belonging as contributing factors to the development of an OCL.

In order to contextualise the ideas being discussed in this paper, the following section provides a brief overview of some features of distance learning including: the place and function of computer mediated communication; online communities of learners; and the notions of sense of belonging and social presence.

**COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

The development and expansion of the World Wide Web (WWW), combined with increased availability of access in homes, has meant that new opportunities have been developed for learning and teaching. Salmon (2006) refers to these opportunities as ‘net worked learning’.

One form of ‘net worked learning’ is computer mediated communication (CMC). CMC is defined as “the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages” (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004, p. 398). CMC has opened up opportunities for new ways of interacting and communicating in online distance programmes and the most recent distance education programmes have become reliant on CMC for support and facilitation.

The development of CMC has redefined the notion of distance education (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Firstly, it enables tertiary providers to offer cost effective programmes where the learner can dictate when and where they access the information by providing flexibility and choice for the learner (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Secondly, CMC has become fundamental to the facilitation of online collaboration as it provides many forms of online interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

This marks a paradigm shift from traditional views of the transmission of knowledge from lecturer to learner to incorporating contemporary socio-constructivist theories of learning. Palloff and Pratt further explain this by acknowledging that “Key to the learning process in on-line collaboration are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these actions” (1999, p. 5).

In educational contexts interactions are defined as occurring between the learner and the content of the programme, between the learner and the instructor, and between the learner and other learners in the programme (Moore, 2004). This online interaction and collaboration can contribute to the development of online learning communities (OCL).

**UNDERSTANDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS**

Unlike a face-to-face community of learners, an OCL is not bound by geography or time, and uses the technology of computer mediated communication as a tool to support communication, interaction, and collaboration within the community (Palloff and Pratt, 2005). An OCL
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