ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to explore three asynchronous communication activities with graduate students in an online course. Asynchronous discussions transcripts, a sense of community survey, and a course evaluation questionnaire were used to collect and analyze data. The results of this study may have implications for an effective design of asynchronous communication and interactions between student and instructor, student and student, and students and content. Results indicate that well-designed asynchronous activities can help to promote sense of community among online students. Implications and challenges in implementing asynchronous activities to foster sense of community and learning in an online learning environment are also discussed.

Keywords: Asynchronous Activities, Distance Education, Higher Education, Instructional Design, Sense of Community

INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of online programs in higher education requires continued attention to the design of instructional environments to improve learning. Among different learning theories, constructivism emphasizes the generation of knowledge by the learners through their interactions with the community and the environment (Driscoll, 2005; Harasim, 2012). Huang (2002) asserted that constructivist principles could help educators create relevant online learning environments for adult learners. Among the many factors that may impact the success of the online environments, the development of online communities has become an important field of interest, especially in higher education (Bond & Lockee, 2014; Roberts & Lund, 2007; Shea, 2006).

Based on collaborative constructivism, Garrison’s (2011) Community of Inquiry (CoI) identified social presence, cognitive presence,
and teaching presence as key elements to inform instructional design in order to create meaning-ful e-learning experiences (Richardson, et al., 2012). One important factor to foster social and teaching presence is sense of community (SoC) (Kim, Kwon & Cho, 2011; Shea, Li, Swan, and Pickett, 2005). Rovai (2002b) defined classroom community as

...a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to each other and to the school, and that they possess shared expectations that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared learning goals. One can, therefore, constitutively define classroom community as consisting of two components: feelings of connectedness among community members and commonality of learning expectations and goals. (p. 322)

There have been several attempts to identify general recommendations to promote SoC. Palloff and Pratt (2007) suggested active interaction, collaborative learning, socially constructed meaning, resource sharing, and expressions of support and encouragement. Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) identified three similar qualities that activities should have to promote learning communities in the classroom: providing individual development and collaborative construction of knowledge, sharing knowledge and skills among members of the community, and making learning processes visible. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) also suggested three instructional strategies to promote SoC in distance education: promoting initial bonding, monitoring and supporting interaction and participation, and providing multiple ways of communication. Focusing on the types of learner-learner interactions, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) found that the following activities, in order of relevance, have an impact on developing students’ SoC in online learning: introductions, collaborative group projects, contributing personal experiences, entire class online discussions, and exchanging resources.

Asynchronous Learning Activities

As defined by Hiltz, Turoff and Harasim (2007), “Asynchronous refers to computer-mediated communication systems that allow anytime communication via the Internet” (p. 55). Due to the difficulties of being connected online at the same time because of work, family and other commitments, asynchronous computer-mediated activities are great alternatives to promote communication among students (Hrastinski, 2008; Simonson et al., 2012). Among the different asynchronous activities, online discussions are identified as key activities of interactive learning environments (De Wever et al. 2006; Ertmer et al., 2007; Swan, 2001). However, it may happen that these forums are merely spaces to share information without evidence of critical analysis or higher order thinking (Black, 2005). Describing strategies to facilitate online discussions effectively, Rovai (2007) stated, “... instructors need to provide discussion forums for socio-emotional discussions that have the goal of nurturing a strong sense of community within the course as well as group discussion forums for content-and task-oriented discussions that center on authentic topics” (p. 77).

Besides the learning management systems used to implement online education, it is relevant to consider the use of additional Web 2.0 technologies to design activities that promote students’ learning through collaboration (Hill, 2013; Hsu, Ching & Grabowsk, 2014). A new set of web-based tools that offer communication through audio and video could help instructors design activities that foster learning and promote community. As stated by Marra (2013), “Online learning lacks the opportunities for both nonverbal and synchronous communication that can take place in face-to-face settings. Thus the tools that support conversations – both synchronous and asynchronous – are critical to participant interactions and ultimately student learning in online courses” (p. 275). One example is
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