

Using Online Reflection and Conversation to Build Community

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Abstract

The authors examined online responses of a cohort of teachers, most of whom were taking their first graduate course. The teachers (students) posted their ideas within six blogs. Of 26 students, 11 (42.31%) consented to the analysis of their reflections. Basing their interpretation on stages of online community developed by Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, and Varonis (2006), the authors describe the progress of one group through the stages, discuss three themes that related to a sense of classroom community, and offer suggestions for using online conversation to build classroom community.

Introduction

Reflection represents an important skill for university students that encourages connection of course content to personal and professional experiences. As a solitary act, it represents an opportunity to connect to a classroom community. Such connections often shape conversations among classmates, as participants relate to peers who struggle with similar issues. These classroom conversations, a collective opportunity to share insights, often increase contextual relevance, personal growth and professional collaboration.

Instructional strategies that employ Internet communication tools may provide learners with introspective opportunities to relate to a larger classroom community. Electronic communications offer mediums for prompting reflective engagement with small group peer-support. This paper describes patterns of conversation in online reflections among a cohort of teachers, most of who were taking their first graduate course. Our interpretation of these reflections, both in terms of length and depth, illustrates patterns of communication that build community. We begin with a review of research on online community with special attention to the work of Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, and Varonis (2006). Later, we describe this research study and its connection to the developmental stages outlined by Waltonen-Moore

et al. We conclude by considering how online conversations relate to classroom community and offer suggestions for future practice.

Literature Review

Instructional technology represents a tool for developing learning community. Waltonen-Moore, et al. (2006) observed the presence of five development stages in their descriptions of how threaded discussions developed online community. In the introduction stage, posts provide contextual information with strong affective elements as the content lacks curricular relevancy. The identification stage finds members empathizing and associating with each other. They find common interests on which to base conversations. Student reflection occurs through intentional dialogue about course material. Involvement occurs when members work together to develop understandings about content. Finally, inquiry occurs when members extend the information to other contexts and develop new ideas through their conversations. At this stage, groups are thinking at higher levels.

Electronic communications offer mediums to prompt reflective engagement through structured processes. Wade, Niederhauser, Cannon and Long (2001) posted weekly questions about inclusion for small (5-7) groups of students. The small groups facilitated communities within the class, enabled dialogues, and fostered discussions. Geer and Hamill (2003) described use of an electronic course discussion board to support guided journals and Tillman (2003) used reciprocal journaling to foster student contemplation about daily professional and personal experiences. Tillman documented that challenges of reciprocal journaling with professional authority figures present powerful implications for educators and concluded that a sense of comfort must occur to enable meaningful conversations between reciprocal journal writers.

Positive settings also relate to community building. Merseth's (1991) and Anderson and Lee's (1995) successes using technology to facilitate social, emotional, and moral support among beginning teachers and Nicholson and Bond's (2003) finding of increased discussion board participation from perceptions of professional support and community, illustrate the relevancy of positive environments to online community establishment. Online members need a sense of social safety, through relationships with the instructor or other students, for healthy community to develop. Ruan and Beach's (2005) documentation of successes with self-selected peer groups' support of online reflections illustrates the relevance of this need for a safe social connection.

Users of technology also require time and comfort to communicate meaningfully. Carabajal, LaPointe, and Gunawardena (2003) conveyed the importance of the nature of group development in the formation, development, and accomplishment of tasks within a group over time. Evans-Andris (1995) described three styles of computer use (avoidance, integration, and specialization) that teachers proceed through as they become more experienced. Unfortunately, school districts tend not to provide teachers with sufficient release time for technology training (Brand, 1998; Farenga & Joyce, 2001). Even with training, teachers may not experience topics in the needed depth (McCannon & Crews, 2000). The various factors that influenced this experience (appropriate learning support, technology use acceptance, and safe community induction) suggest that online community results from factors that require thoughtful planning.

Choosing an appropriate medium represents an important element of community building. Blogs represent electronic journaling mediums that offer both privacy and community. Peterson and Caverly (2005) argued that student blog responses reveal intellectual insights of

“social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence.” (p. 38). They posited that these three conditions exist to different degrees, affecting patterns of student motivation, literacy structure, and collaborative discourse. Poling (2005) described different types of blogs and their appropriateness for educational use. She identified individual blogs as websites where students can “set up . . . a place to journal, respond to others, or post resources.” (p. 12). Moreover, she defined this activity as most appropriate for those students who possess strong technology and interpersonal skills.

The literature indicates the online community development occurs through stages. Yet the environments in which these processes occur may relate to rates of progression. Positive settings that prompt user comfort enhance reflective processes; however, their relationship to community development stages remains unclear. Two research questions guided our study: what were the patterns of peer interactions and how did they relate to the stages of online community?

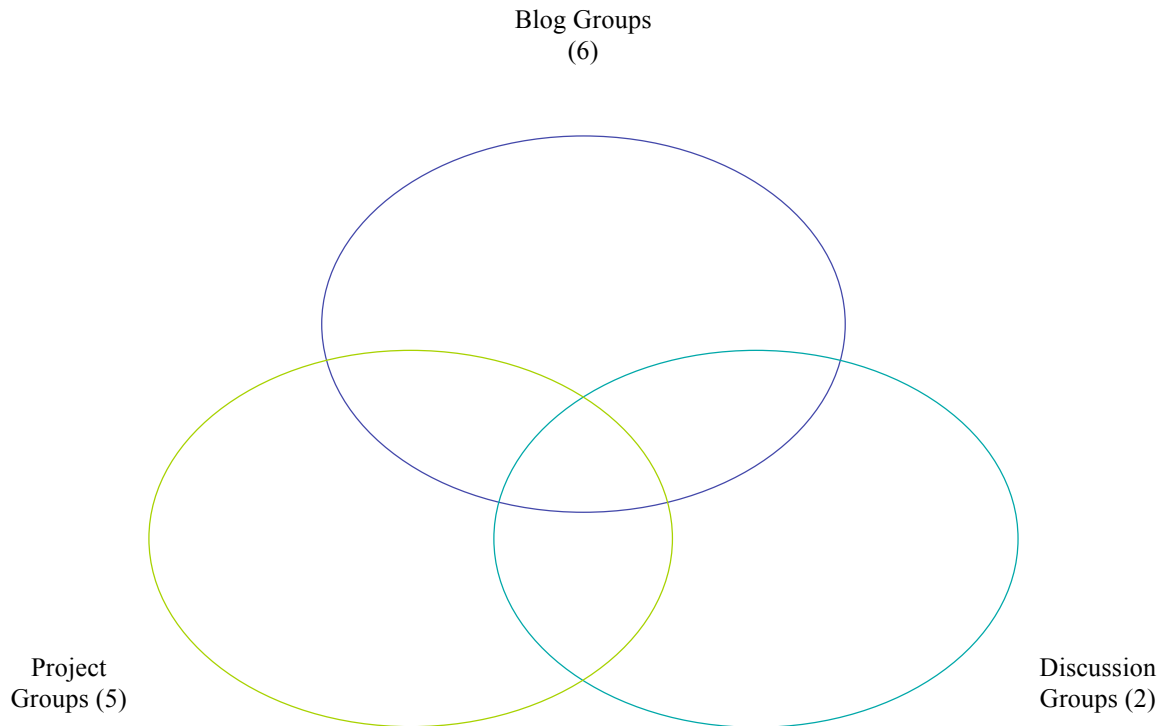
Methodology

We compared threaded discussion board transcripts to see if the discussions of participants proceeded at similar rates through the stages outlined in Waltonen-Moore, et al. (2006). We employed methodology in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) because this review of the data encouraged an interpretation of how online discussions shaped subsequent conversation. We used open coding to label differences among online responses and axial coding to position stages within a time line. A more detailed explanation of coding procedures follows in the analysis section.

Sample. Our work centered on enrollees in a graduate level professional development course for educators at a large Midwestern university. The study employed a convenience sample of students in a discussion-based graduate level course, *Student Diversity and Educational Practices*. The course had 26 students, of whom 11 (42.31%) consented to the analysis of their blog reflections. Students were required to read and discuss weekly readings, analyze articles, review literature, and interview community leaders.

The primary author structured the course in three hour-long segments. During the first and third hours, two groups discussed assigned readings. Students self-selected group membership; groups alternated meeting during beginning or ending hour each week. The middle hour was large group instruction dictated by student and course needs (i.e., questions about assignments, explanation of content, or project collaboration periods). The primary author randomly assigned students to project groups. Thus, students were members of three different groups in this course: blog, project, and discussion. This arrangement simulated the different patterns of identity that develop from various groupings that occur within society.

Figure 1. Student groupings within the course.



Data sources

Data derived from student posts and responses within six blogs at the website <http://www.blogger.com>. The primary author's graduate assistant randomly assigned students to blog groups. The students posted reflections in each blog in accordance with the syllabus description provided below. Data also resulted from responses to student posts. For each blog, the instructor provided students with a schedule of the assigned recipients of their weekly responses.

Table 1 provides the number of posts, number of responses, and percentage of responses for the respective blogs of those students who consented to analysis of their work. We excluded the number of posts associated with Blog C and Blog F because of the inapplicability of the information. Blog A yielded a very high percentage of responses to posts. Thus it represents the focus of our analysis.

Table 1

Frequency of Comments and Responses

	Members Analyzed	Posts	Responses	Response Percentages
Blog A	3	115	51	44.35%
Blog B	2	31	4	12.90%
Blog C	1	na	na	
Blog D	2	28	8	28.57%
Blog E	2	81	2	2.04%
Blog F	1	na	na	

na: not applicable.

Procedure

Each student began the course completing a daily online blog journal. The syllabus described the assignment in the following manner:

You are to keep a *daily* online journal (beginning after our first meeting) that documents your reflections on multicultural issues and experiences. The reflections may be about the class, your readings, people you encounter, your past, your classroom, or anything else that is multiculturally related.

The assignment purposed for students to relate readings and discussions to their professional and personal lives. It intended to build awareness among classmates of common experiences and to build connections among peers as they completed course requirements. The syllabus descriptor was the only prompt provided to students. During the initial meeting, the instructor demonstrated how to access the blog and post a comment. When provided, the instructor's responses to posts were generally brief questions designed to encourage student elaboration.

All of the students were full time teachers. In response to student concerns about assignment requirements, the instructor reduced daily journal requirements to encourage entries every other day. At the beginning of the semester, he provided schedules to direct patterns of student feedback; however, in early February, removed these requirements to allow students more autonomy in responding to posts of interest.

The syllabus instructed students to employ “sound” principles when providing their feedback.

- Supportive and nonjudgmental responses
- Offering of helpful resources
- Understanding of challenges
- Nurturing elaboration or exploration of ideas
- Devising new ways of resolving issues

The primary author developed this acronym as a device to encourage students’ positive and constructive mutual support. Since most of students were taking their first graduate course, the reflections served as mechanisms to carry further conversations from (and about) the learning outside the physical classroom. However, with one exception, the instructor made isolated efforts to build on reflections for class discussions. The exception occurred when the instructor initiated a post in all of the blogs. The post provided a link (different links for each blog) to information of multicultural interest (e.g., news story, an explanation of theory) and asked students to click on the link and respond to the information.

Data collection

At the end of the last meeting, the primary author distributed forms, through a student volunteer, that sought students’ consent to analyze their blog posts and responses. Completed consent forms were not accessible to the primary author until after he posted students’ final grades. In this paper, the authors identify the blogs using the letters A through F, and use pseudonyms to preserve student anonymity.

Analysis

Student responses were coded by frequency and branching patterns. Once coded, data were organized according to the five stages described in Waltonen-Moore et al. (2006). Coding procedures were based on Strauss and Corbin (1990). Step one of open coding: (1) named topics or subjects of the entries of each blog/group; (2) named the characteristics and purposes of the entries; (3) grouped and labeled the explicit differences regarding the depth and purposes of the entries; and (4) compared and contrasted the coded/labeled depth with the stages labeled by Waltonen-Moore et al. (2006). Step two of open coding tallied the frequencies of the postings each day throughout the semester, divided the timeline into phases of 15 days each, and accumulated the frequency of comments in each phase. Step three used axial coding to conceptualize progress through the development stages: first, to label entry gained in open coding and second, to position stages within the time line.

Results

Because of the marginal consent rate, we provide quantitative findings to depict an overview of posting patterns. We supplement these patterns with qualitative information, interpreting posts and responses, and their relationship to these numeric levels and trends. We present the results in two sections. In the first, we compare the blogs, and interpret the patterns of influence on progression through the stages. In the second, we describe the progress of one blog

through the stages identified by Waltonen-Moore et al. (2006) and summarize activities of the other blogs.

Blog Comparisons

The groups progressed at different rates through five stages of development identified by Waltonen-Moore et al. (2006). Tables 2 and 3 depict the frequencies of responses and the rates of progression through these stages. The patterns and frequency of postings convey the culture and level of community engagement of each group.

We describe the connection of responses as “branching,” the continuation of an idea beyond its original source. The frequency of postings influenced the opportunity for branching as more postings provided more opportunities for others to respond to original postings. The absence of branching, therefore, indicated the end of conversation.

Generally, movement through stages related to the topic of discussion rather than the branching of responses. Topics preceded responses and branching created the possibility of additional responses. To this end, the patterns of branching varied by topics, within categories and among groups. For example, members of Blog A attained the fifth stage before the other groups and had the highest percentage of responses to member posts. Members of Blog E did not reach the fifth stage.

Table 2

Frequency of Comments per Each Phase of Each Blog

	Members Analyzed	January 16-31	February 1-15	February 16-28	March 1-15	March 16-31
Blog A	3	41 Stage 1	21 Stage 2 to 3	18 Stage 4	9 Stage 5	8 Stage 5
Blog B	2	5 Stage 1 to Stage 2	6 Stage 2	5 Stage 3	2 Stage 4	6 Stage 5
Blog C	1	2 Stage 1 to Stage 3	5 Stage 3	0 Stage 3	1 Stage 3	1 Stage 5
Blog D	2	2 Stage 2	4 Stage 3 and 4	6 Stage 4	3 Stage 4	5 Stage 5
Blog E	2	9 Stage 1	1 Stage 2	0 Stage 2	4 Stage 3	5 Stage 4
Blog F	1	2 Stage 1-4	2 Stage 4	1 Stage 4	1 Stage 4	3 Stage 5

Table 3

Dates that each Group Attained Each Stage of Community

	Members	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Blog A	3	January 16-31	February 1-15	February 1-15	February 16-28	March 1-15
Blog B	2	January 16-31	January 16-31	February 16-28	March 1-15	March 16-31
Blog C	1	January 16-31	January 16-31	January 16-31	--	March 16-31
Blog D	2	--	January 16-31	February 1-15	February 1-15	March 16-31
Blog E	2	January 16-31	February 1-15	March 1-15	March 16-31	--
Blog F	1	January 16-31	January 16-31	January 16-31	February 1-15	March 16-31

Case Study: Blog A

Because the marginal permission rates abbreviated our ability to interpret patterns of community development within each blog, we describe how members of Blog A progressed through Walton-Moore, et al.'s (2006) community stages. Although we organize our account by stages, the stages for the blog represent a composite of progress by the individual members. An individual member may be transitioning from one stage while the group, as a whole, remains in another.

There were four members of Blog A. Three (75.00%) consented to our analysis of their comments. All members were veteran teachers. The membership of this blog was very social and conversant online. This blog provided the most number of students who consented to analysis of their responses.

Stage 1: Introduction Stage January 16-31

Stage 2: Increasing sense of openness and comfort February 1-15

Within Blog A, we perceive trust as building very early. Both Julie and Shannon were veteran teachers who knew each other from outside of the course. Both middle school teachers, Shannon taught technology courses while Julie taught social studies. Many posts consisted of exchanges between these two members. Their open communications supported other members' participation efforts and fed community development. By expressing concerns that others identified with and asking others about their needs and concerns, these two members served as catalysts for community building.

Early in the semester, Shannon expressed some concerns about her teaching and learning obligations: "How will I do this and be a quality teacher too?" (January 20). While this post conveyed a sense of anxiety to other blog members, it represented a gesture of emotional trust. By revealing her concerns, Shannon invited both supportive responses and genuine expression. At the same time, she expressed interest in others' experiences, by asking, "What is your topic for research?" in response to Julie's January 20 post. Julie's posts expressing concern about course requirements (January 20) and finding research literature (January 24) related to the anxiety that Shannon expressed.

Phoebe, a third year teacher, was recovering from a divorce and related financial difficulties. In class, she was open about her background and experiences and sought professional advice from colleagues. She posted her initial reflection late because of technology access challenges, yet despite her setbacks, she encouraged her blog mates "Hand in there guys --we are on an adventure together" (January 21). Phoebe did not have offline contact with Shannon and Julie; however, as will be noted below, her posts opened opportunities for conversations about topics that the other two overlooked or ignored.

The group transitioned to stage two through two notable posts. On January 22, Shannon described the first installment of an education series concerning different religions, presented at her church. Her post related the tenets of Hinduism and compared them to understandings of Christianity. This post conveyed a sense of openness towards members, and the willingness to share potentially controversial subjects with them. Julie's response affirmed interest in the topic; however, avoided conversation about the topic itself. Shannon endeavored to further the conversations by responding to Julie through creation of a new thread and observation of their common interests in different religions, despite their preparations at two curricularly dissimilar

undergraduate institutions. Julie did not respond to this post. Thus, Shannon offered a sense of openness to the group; however, introductory elements prevented the conversation's development.

On January 24, Julie posted about an impromptu study hall conversation concerning the movie *Remember the Titans*. Her amazement at students' awareness of the movie content offered potential for discussion; however, it fell short of relating attitudes towards the movie with daily practice towards others. The lack of responses indicated that blog mates were unable or unwilling to pursue the conversations about this topic at this time. Nevertheless, the post signifies her willingness to initiate dialogues about multicultural topics through "safe" conversational bridges, such as student attitudes and media portrayals.

This effort continued in her January 31 post, "Today my classes were assigned a speech to write as if they were the president having to make a decision to drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan. 90% of the students' speeches included dropping the bomb and reasons for this decision." Phoebe took up the topic, providing two responses. The first attributed the situation to 9-11 attacks. The second built from a thrown off concluding sentence, where Julie mentioned that Black History Month began the following day, and Phoebe responded that, "I worked with a black teacher a few years ago and she made an interesting comment about Black History Month." "She said 'It's real generous of you white folk to give us a whole month to study black history...I have had to learn a lot about the contributions that black people have made to our country.' " (February 1). Though Julie did not respond to Phoebe's posts, these responses presented an environment of open valued expression.

Stage 3: Trust and Reliance February 1-15

The group continued its discussions of provocative topics, as it progressed through the third stage. Shannon's February 2 post solicited others' thoughts about "Broke Back Mountain", a film that reportedly concerned alternate lifestyles. Her post prompted responses from both Phoebe, "I wonder how I will feel if we ever discuss diversity along those lines" (February 2) and Julie "I would like to see the movie. My husband would never go!" (February 2). Yet, Shannon did not respond to either of these posts.

On February 3, Julie expressed frustration with school administrators' inconsistencies in student dealings "I am totally losing faith in the administration for a plethora of reasons...Every day I waste valuable teacher time." Both Phoebe and Shannon responded promptly. Phoebe conveyed empathy for Julie's situation, "That kind of stuff happens at our school too...I know that it is not easy when there is disrespect, but somehow that cycle needs to be broken." Shannon's response provided support and advice. "In years past we had administration who would rather be friends with students than a disciplinarian...Have you talked the situation over with your administration...And remember document, document, document, everything."

Shannon's February 7 post sought help with regard to inclusion from blog mates. "Help...I am so frustrated because all of my other students are able to keep up. Should I slow down for one student and let the other 21 wait for me?" Julie's response provided an instructional modification and invited a face-to-face conversation about the matter.

Stage 4: Comfortable and Involved February 16-28

Shannon expressed comfort with the process much earlier than her blog mates did. Through her February 10 post, she mused, “No I need to rethink this. I will have to do two things tomorrow, because I have too much going on at school to wait until the workweek. Okay, I know all of you didn’t want to hear that, but I check my blog responses more frequently than my email these days, that in a sense I am blogging to myself.” At this stage, she assisted Julie, by providing suggestions for finding literature, “One thing I did was to type in different key words to search for” (February 19). Julie did not respond to this post. She also conveyed the successes of her implementing a silent writing activity from class “The kids all had a great time, and I think learned something also...I will do this activity again. Not too soon, because I don’t think it would be special if we did it all the time. (February 28). Julie responded that she would also implement this activity soon.

Julie’s posts increasingly examined the reading content. “If diverse students are successful in school, based on the American education ideal, aren’t these students becoming “Americanized”? One can’t be successful in a U.S. school unless they are successful based on set standards. What is success? Harvard? Ivy League? I guess I am finding contradictory information. (Julie, February 28). None responded to this aspect of her post; however, despite this silence, Julie had begun the transition to the final stage.

Stage 5: Inquiry stage March 1-15

Julie’s inquiries persisted into March. For example, her March 6 post responded to posts by all members, and commented on apparent redundancy in the text (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). “Every chapter has Vygotsky, Dewey, Pavlov, etc....My head spins with all these names. Here we go again, being told how bad testing and categorizing is; however, we are still required to test and categorize...Socially people categorize others as shy, loud, obnoxious, stupid, and stereotype no matter what. I am sure Oakes has too.” Her March 20 post revisited the administrative challenges presented earlier in the semester. “The administration plays a huge part of the success of a school. I am a little upset about our administration still.”

Summary

In this blog we observe a sense of candidness and comfort prompted by positive and affirming expressions. Although deep conversations did not occur, the blog served as a venue for mutual encouragement. Absent a formal structure, the community developed through its members’ own openness, encouragement, and support. Simultaneously, the community built upon prior familiarity between two members, which fed another’s involvement.

Other Blogs

The following sections summarize the findings associated with the remaining blogs. The comparatively small number of students that consented to analysis of their reflections limits our interpretations. It is noteworthy that the percentages of posts that were responded to in each of these blogs were less than those percentages for Blog A, even adjusting for the number of members analyzed.

Blog B. There were five members of Blog B. Two (40.00%) consented to the analysis of their comments. Nina was a Caucasian female in her first year of teaching. Usually quiet in class and tentative with her contributions, Nina used the blog to explore ideas about multicultural topics. Jim was a Caucasian male sixth grade teacher with several years of experience. While Jim was generally quiet in class, he was “matter of fact” with his contributions; however, as the course progressed, his contributions assumed a more light-hearted tone. Nina presented simple, well-meaning thoughts about course content, connecting with the needs of underrepresented students. Although she expressed good intentions, Nina’s limited classroom experiences challenged her abilities to support her ideas. Jim’s posts were more candid and decisive. His direct language presented a sense of authority that required respondents to challenge or affirm his views. Although postings and responses between the two occurred, substantive dialogues did not.

Blog C. There were four members of Blog C. One member (25.00%) gave permission to use her comments. Sheryl was a seasoned veteran. Her posts depicted her energetic and enthusiastic disposition and provided much information about her experiences. In the class, she participated in a supporting role, mostly validating comments of colleagues. Her posts are introspective with little prompting necessary.

Blog D. There were four members of Blog D. Two (50.00%) gave permission to use their comments. Sarah, a young teacher, was very introverted in class. Justine, a veteran second grade teacher was extroverted. Both students’ posts document their awareness of cultural differences. Justine responded to three of Sarah’s posts. Sarah responded to four of Justine’s posts.

Blog E. There were four members of Blog E. Two (50.00%) gave permission to use their comments. Both Amy and Kelly were veteran teachers who were concerned about the course and the time it took away from their children and families. Amy was a high school special education teacher and Kelly was a middle school science teacher. Both explored topics in depth. Kathy responded only to Amy’s initial post, providing a positive spin on Amy’s concerns about the course demands. Amy responded to one of Kathy’s posts, supporting Kathy’s concerns about differences in healthcare access.

Blog F. There were four members of Blog F. One (25.00%) gave her permission. Cindy was a veteran first grade teacher. In class discussions about controversial topics, her reluctance to “confront others” (January 22) may have inhibited her participation in class discussions. Her posts document a sense of awe with her discoveries, yet a need for advice from blog mates.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that there are factors associated with how these graduate students used online discussion to build classroom community. We realize that our explanation of these influences and the extendibility of these results are limited by the low response rate. Studies that have higher response rates or that employ larger and more diverse groups need to confirm or refute the patterns of online participation described here. In addition, we recognize that findings may relate to the postings of other blog contributors, and not the community itself. Although patterned relationships still emerged despite the exclusion of these students, including the entire conversation may have provided for a richer description of the conversation. Finally, we acknowledge that patterns of communication may involve elements of familiarity among group members. Those who knew each other outside of class communicated more readily in their blogs than those who did not. We also realize that perceptions of individual identity and belonging

shape understandings of community awareness. Future studies could use Kelchtermans's (2007) stages of reflection development as a framework for interpreting such perceptions.

Nevertheless, three important themes emerged from our analysis of these patterns of conversations. The structure of the class and the structure of assignments associated with length and depth of blog discussions; the quality and quantity of blog posts reflected the students' familiarity with technology and their familiarity with each other through the various course groupings; and reflection was a catalyst for online group development.

Theme 1: The structure of the class and the structure of assignments related to the length and depth of blog discussions.

The instructor assigned students into three different groups for three different class assignments. This structuring simulated how individuals affiliate themselves with different community members for different purposes (e.g., work, worship, and entertainment). These environments created different degrees of student involvement in technology conversation. This course did not force students to post reflections of any particular length. There was no assessment rubric associated with the postings. The instructor randomly assigned students into groups, and reduced posting requirements. The instructor was not omnipresent in blog conversations and did not assign points based on perceived quality of student response. Rather, the teacher posted feedback to individuals to prompt deeper explorations of considered issues and offered links to articles for student feedback. Students received full credit for completing the assignments.

This blog represented a convenience and an inconvenience. Students could post reflections and responses at anytime; however, they needed to find computers, negotiate the blog menus, and determine the identities of their blog members. As they overcame these challenges and familiarized themselves with technology tools, they were able to focus on their reflections and mastery of the course content.

Theme 2: The quality and quantity of blog posts reflected the students' familiarity with technology and their familiarity with each other through the various course groupings.

Each blog included participants with different degrees of technology experience, expertise and interest. The patterns of conversation reflected these differences. The instructor graded students on their efforts to complete the assignment, respectful of their diverse backgrounds of technology experience. The blog conversations simulated patterns of cultural networks and the choices in community affiliation that occur. Students experienced three different communities in this course: discussion communities, blog communities, and project communities. The focus of blog posts on personal concerns represents a different mind-set from the other communities. Blog posts stemmed from contextually variant thoughts and ideas, whereas classroom and project discussions were more content focused. The students completed assignments online without realizing the possibility of this work developing into greater insights, much like a struggling reader experiences comprehension challenges because of a focus on decoding strategies. In both cases, attention was directed to the task at hand. Consequently, these blogs revealed, rather than influenced, the characteristics of its members.

The process of reflection offers opportunities for developing contextual awareness. Kelchtermans's (2007) observation that one develops his or her understanding of relationships to

professional settings through five reflection stages: self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception, and future perspective, illustrates how social awareness begins with a firm interpretation of identity and connection with social systems. The first two steps develop of a positive sense of self. Respectful communities (de Cremer & Tyler, 2005) include multiple opportunities for members to build trust. As moral/emotional support represents a component of online community (Anderson & Lee, 1995; Merseeth, 1991; Nicholson & Bond, 2003), repeated opportunities to build these relationships are critical to identity development.

Some students experienced difficulty reflecting about their thoughts and ideas. For example, Justine expressed discomfort with African Americans' extroverted worship practice. This post stemmed from an assignment that required students to choose from a list of "unusual" situations to experience and reflect upon their meanings. One of the options was to attend a church service that they did not usually frequent. The assignment forced students to experience cultural settings that they usually did not and recognize the challenges of performing in education settings that force acceptance on dominant cultural "norms". Junstine received no peer responses to encourage further reflection regarding the reasons for her feelings.

Generally, online communications occurred sporadically, lacked breath and did not regenerate. Thus, one may question whether conversations occurred at all. Perhaps this related to students' perception of the blog conversations as an assignment, rather than as a method for professional or personal discourse. Although students overcame the stress of adapting to the new schedule, the routine was insufficient to allow for conversational regularity and continuity. The varying familiarity or comfort with technology, subject matter, and professional and domestic responsibilities may have related to students' blog participation. While this class consisted of a cohort of students, many who taught at the same site, this class was the first graduate course for most. The context of forging relationships among students served a distracter from developing online community.

Theme 3: Reflection was a catalyst for online group development.

During the last month of the semester, all but one group displayed extended discussions with longer postings, more participants, and lengthier conversations. With one exception, every blog group proceeded through Waltonen-Moore et al.'s (2006) five stages of community development; however, the groups progressed at rates that were representative of the relationships among members, the nature of topics, and the demands on their lives. Here we view each individual as contextualizing his or her identity and developing a broader awareness of his or her social role (Kelchtermans, 2007).

It is not entirely certain whether group development actually emerged online as a community of learners. Additional data, such as videos of classroom conversations and focus group interviews would confirm or refute this idea. Future studies should consider such data sources and relate them to patterns of online conversation. The forced communication and variable "real" interactions may have related to frequency patterns. In a sense, we witnessed an element of social accountability at play. The assignment required supporting posts; yet the nature of the support depended on the topic of the initial post and the willingness of others to engage in further conversation. Students had assignment requirements to fulfill through their reflection posts; however, their online interactions were limited to familiar or agreed upon topics.

Waltonen-Moore et al. (2006) recognized that online community relates to offline community. In terms of accountability, both online and "real" communities are synchronous as

members know each other both on- and off-line. We believe that, while degrees of organization will vary, a completely online community offers limited accountability unless purpose, definition, and structure are transparent, supportive and mutually beneficial (O'Malley & Baker, 2006).

The students realized the rationale for the course structure at the final meeting. During this session, the instructor utilized the card game "skat" to simulate the challenges that occur when using familiar tools (cards) in unfamiliar ways (unconventional card rankings and scoring methods). The debriefing from this activity challenged enrollees to consider how the various groupings that they experienced in this course mirrored patterns of social groupings, the cultural patterns that they follow, and the judgments that occur. It also explained that the purpose of the various groups was to simulate the patterns of groupings that occur in society, and how both fate and choice represent factors in their formation.

While withholding the purpose for the grouping processes until the course's conclusion created an authentic multicultural learning experience, it may have also contributed to inequitable technology learning settings. Considering the disparate access challenges associated with the digital divide (Lucey & Grant, 2007), this assignment represented an authentic technology experience as well. The instructor clearly defined and structured the assignment, modifying and assessing the process to suit students' needs. Students generally struggled to build online community without classroom and professional support or reinforcement.

The building of online community may not solely relate the conditions under which they occur. They require debriefing that examines the relationship structures, particularly, their sources, natures, and outcomes, and how students may apply knowledge of these structures in the building of their daily classroom, personal, and social communities.

Conclusions

The study found that the blog where students experienced a safe, open, and supportive environment progressed through Waltonen-Moore, et al.'s (2006) stages of group formation more readily than the other blog groups. Familiarity with technology and with peers related to choices that students made to reflect honestly and openly about sensitive issues. Differences in performance are associated with technology access (Lucey & Grant, 2008), usage (Monke, 1998), effects (Bradshaw & Johari, 2002), computer familiarity (Evans-Andris, 1995), and grouping patterns (Peterson & Caverly, 2005). Our paper provides evidence that grouping patterns relate to patterns of conversation. Insights into the patterns of conversation among unacquainted students may lead to descriptions of ways to encourage classroom community. It is important to pursue how technology promotes patterns of online communication and influences student understanding of course content.

We view four strategies worthy of consideration towards building online community. First, we suggest beginning online reflection activities after students have had opportunities to work together on in-class activities. An abeyance provides opportunities for students to bond with classmates and forge relationships that may carryover to online settings. Second, we encourage employment of technology activities to familiarize students with technology communication tools before beginning online interaction. Such efforts ease burdens of technological fears and may empower deeper reflection about course content. Identifying an online community is a complex endeavor because multiple factors influence its development. Third, we recommend relating the nature of technology-based learning to the

volume and characteristics of other course requirements. While academics recognize the desirability of rigor in their courses, excessive course expectations may prompt work products done for completion sake, rather than intellectual engagement. We encourage those who employ technology-based communication activities in their course to employ adaptable strategies that respond to learner needs.

Finally, we recommend conversation to analyze the processes and their extension to personal and professional practice. The work of Walton-Moore, et al. (2006) does inform our understanding of the progression of stages within community development. Yet, assignment structures, various student personas, subject nature, and assignment requirements represent related factors that merit closer examination. We encourage research into these relationships and their impact on extending online conversations.

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