

The Link: Building Community in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract: As the use of online technology for educational purposes continues to grow, there is a need for greater understanding of how learning communities are built in online environments. This paper outlines the results of a study exploring an online bridging module offered to graduate students. The module has been offered in a variety of forms since 2006 to orient students to their programs as well as to begin the learning community development process. Likert scale and open-ended questions were used to collect students' perceptions of the 2014 module. While positive comments were received about activities that gave participants the ability to connect and communicate prior to the beginning of the program, it was clear that there was a need to have a flexible approach to the timing of the synchronous sessions, as well as to ensure the activities are practical in nature.

Introduction

As the use of online technology for educational purposes continues to grow ([Canadian Virtual University, 2012](#); [Kanuka, 2008](#); [White, Warren, Faughnan, & Manton, 2010](#)), there is an increased need for greater understanding of how learning communities are developed and supported in online environments ([LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008](#); [Palloff & Pratt, 2007](#)). In 2006, at a small university in Western Canada, a two week online bridging module was offered to undergraduate students studying in an on-campus program. While it served to familiarize the students with the university and the program prior to their arrival on campus, the intent was also to use the module as an opportunity for participants to begin building a learning community. Since the start of the first module, *The Bridge to BCom*, several modules have been delivered to students in a variety of programs at the university and, as a result, our understanding of the activities that contribute to the building of learning communities online has grown.

In 2014, students were given the choice of taking one of two pathways into a graduate program. The first pathway was for students who preferred a blended option, one that started with an on-campus residency; the second pathway was for students who wished to study exclusively online. Those choosing the first option met on campus for two weeks where they learned about the university's academic support units, took part in face-to-face community building activities, and worked on two academic courses. Conversely, the students choosing the online pathway took a bridging module called *The Link*; this module was designed to cover the same information about academic support units and begin the learning community development process. After completing *The Link*, the online pathway students took the first two online courses consecutively.

When entering the third course in the program, students from both pathways began working together, forming a merged cohort. The key challenge at this stage was how to provide students in the two pathways with a common foundation of knowledge on which to build a larger cohesive cohort. Depending on the chosen pathway, the two groups had different experiences and perceptions, so it was important to provide them with a similar knowledge base and an opportunity to build relationships.

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Considering this challenge, and in light of the university’s focus on students working together in teams and cohorts ([Royal Roads University, 2013](#)), building effective learning communities was paramount. In 2014, as development began on *The Link*, we identified some new technologically-enhanced activities that would mirror those used in the on-campus residency. In addition, we asked the students to find online tools to share with their classmates and we encouraged them to be creative as they applied these tools to the deliverables.

While there were several activities, such as video clips, voice-over PowerPoints, and synchronous Collaborate sessions, designed to provide information on a variety of university services, there were only two specific activities, “Getting to Know You” and “Building your Community: A 3-part Timeline Activity”, that were designed with the intent of assisting in the development of a learning community. In the “Getting to Know You” activity, students were asked to create a short video expanding on their text-based profile. In the other activity, students were asked to contribute to three timelines so they could understand their shared experiences. The following table provides more detail on each activity:

Activity	Description
<i>“Getting to Know You”</i>	
Part 1: Video Production	Use your camera, phone or other device to record a short (2 - 4 minute) video that expands upon and enhances your text-based profile. Alternately, use an application like Mozilla Popcorn Maker, Powtoon, or another of your choice. Make sure your 'presentation' is posted somewhere that gives you a link you can share in the introductions forum. Videos can be uploaded to YouTube for example. Popcorn Maker and Powtoon recordings will stay on those servers. Post the link in the <i>Getting to Know You</i> forum noting whether or not you tried a new application or if this is something you have used previously.
Part 2: Let’s Talk	View your colleagues' profiles and posts. Reply to several of them with an observation or question. Read and respond to some of the replies to your own post.
Part 3: Who are we as a cohort?	Summarize your reactions and think about what you have learned about your colleagues. What are the similarities and differences you observed? What are likely to be our collective strengths? Post a brief paragraph or two answering, "Who are we, as a cohort?"
<i>“Building Your Community: A Three-Part Timeline Activity”</i>	
Timeline 1	What has happened in the past 20 years that everyone remembers? What specifically happened to you that you are willing to share with the cohort? Please post one to three sticky notes on the MALAT LINK Timeline 1 padlet wall by the time and date listed in the Course Schedule.
Timeline 2	Once you have posted to Timeline 1, think about what you hope to see during the next 2+ years... What do you foresee happening? What do you want to see happen? Please post one to three sticky notes on the MALAT LINK Timeline 2 padlet wall by the time and date listed in the Course Schedule.
Timeline 3	Finally, look forward (see... blue skies!) five years. What do you want to see happen? Please post one to three sticky notes on the MALAT LINK Timeline 3 padlet wall by the time and date listed in the Course Schedule.

Table 1: *The Link* Activity Descriptions

Methodology

In order to explore students' perceptions of the 2014 bridging module, a mixed-methods approach was used (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). A survey was made available to *The Link* participants that included Likert scale and open-ended questions. In addition to demographic questions asking the participants to check the appropriate age range and gender, Likert scale questions were focussed on specific *Link* activities and the value participants placed on each as it pertained to the orientation to both the university and the program and the development of a learning community. Participants were asked to state, using a range of one through five – with five being “strongly agree” and one being “strongly disagree” – the value placed on a variety of aspects of the module. The quantitative data was summarized using descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data were gathered through four open-ended questions asking students to elaborate on their experiences and comment on the effectiveness of *The Link* in the orientation process and learning community development. An emergent approach to analyzing the qualitative data was taken, with the themes being determined by three individuals performing an independent examination of the data set.

Findings

Of the twenty students taking part in *The Link*, sixteen responded to the survey, providing a participation rate of 80%. Over 53% of the students who took part were in the 41 to 50 age range, with no participant younger than 26, and none older than 60.

Quantitative Data Analysis

When responding to the statement, *The Link helped me build a learning community with other Link participants*, 86% answered that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, with 7% noting that they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 7% stating they disagreed. To the statement, *I am confident I understand the services offered at the university*, 93% responded that they either agreed or strongly agreed, with 7% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Results were different when participants were asked if they were satisfied with their orientation to the university and when asked a similar question about their orientation to the program; 73% found that their orientation to the university was satisfactory, whereas 87% found their orientation to the program satisfactory. While 7% noted they were dissatisfied with the orientation to the university, none of the participants were dissatisfied with the orientation to the program.

When asked whether the first activity, “Getting to Know You”, contributed to the building of a learning community, 87% either agreed or strongly agreed that it did; however, only 53% of participants thought the second activity, “Building your Community: A Three-part Timeline Activity”, was helpful. This result was supported by the qualitative data, which provided insights on why students found the activities useful and what the specific challenges were with regards to *The Link* implementation.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Seven themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data: connection, practice, communication, tools, layout, timing, and convenience.

Several participants noted the value of the bridging module in helping them feel connected; specifically, one student stated that, “[*The Link*] gave me a sense of connection with my cohort as well as a connection to Royal Roads” (11.2). Another participant spoke of how the module not only allowed him/her to get a sense of the other individuals in the cohort, but also to understand how they could work together in a supportive manner online, “*The Link* was an easy way for us all to open up about details that we otherwise would not share.... this allowed us to find more commonalities and opportunities for peer support” (10.12).

Even though participants appreciated the ability to connect with their cohort, it was noted that more practice working in teams would have been beneficial, “I’d have liked to see one team building activity included where we got a chance to interact with multiple cohort members to get to know their learning styles and strengths” (12.5). In addition to this suggestion, there were several comments pointing to issues with which students had challenges; for example, one participant found the email generated by the Learning Management System overwhelming, “the continuous stream of e-mails replying to any thread I participated in made it difficult to distinguish “important” communications from “me too” responses” (11.10). Another student stated that building a community was not something that could be done hurriedly, “I feel I have to spend time ‘working’ with someone before I can get a feeling of community” (10.1). Nonetheless, some participants commented that the ability to communicate in *The Link* allowed them to get to know each other and achieve a sense of connection, “being able to place a name to an actual face and person can help to create a more connected cohort” (10.4). Other participants commented on the role of the tools in enabling them to create a more connected cohort; as an example, one individual noted that “I enjoyed using different tools to build our self-introduction video. It was helpful to put faces and interests to names and get to know each other the best we can in an online environment” (10.11).

Participants provided suggestions for improving the module layout, such as including “a central point where all links are placed for easy access as well as an FAQ section on the same page” (12.2), and another student asked if we could “offer closed-captioning during collaborate session for international student? At the starting of course/program, everything makes international student wonder” (13.3). While one student noted that he/she, “would rather simply get started with my courses and watch videos/presentations on how Moodle works” (12.1), another participant found the content useful but believed it could have been shorter, “a great start to the Program. I do think it could be condensed into 1 week” (12.10). With respect to the synchronous sessions, one student suggested that in order to increase participation we should provide advanced notice, “in the expectations for the week, list off of the Collaborate times so people can arrange their schedules to hopefully be able to participate” (11.7). Also on the topic of synchronous sessions, it was noted that, “it might be helpful to schedule conference times outside of regular business hours” (12.9) for convenience.

The number of individuals taking part in *The Link* was relatively small; however, the response rate to the survey was 80%, which allowed us to collect a variety of views and contrasting perceptions. Students had positive comments to offer, finding it valuable as they began to build relationships with cohort members; they also had a number of recommendations for further development.

Conclusions

The growing need to understand online learning community development is undeniable given that the number of students enrolling in technology-mediated courses continues to increase. In this study, we explored the effects of offering an online orientation module, which included activities focused on aiding in the development of a learning community, to a cohort of graduate students. Participants’ perceptions of the activities were collected using a survey with Likert scale and open-ended questions. The data showed that students generally found the opportunity to engage in online activities prior to the start of their program of study helpful in developing their learning community. They appreciated the chance to connect with fellow cohort members, as well as the ability to try out new tools in two specific module activities: “Getting to Know You” and “Building Your Community: A Three-Part Timeline Activity”. Consideration of time zones when planning synchronous sessions was stated as being necessary, as was the need to ensure that activities were of a practical nature.

For an online module to be effective in learning community development, it is desirable to provide access to online tools and activities that create an opportunity for individuals to connect and begin to develop relationships. While the students’ perception that it is harder to develop a community online was noted, participants found that by taking part in online activities designed to encourage interaction, they could start establishing supportive relationships. Even though we may not be able to duplicate all aspects of the face-to-face classroom, we can make productive use of the online environment to enable students to connect with each other prior to beginning their academic work.

The development of the bridging module is ongoing and, as technology continues to evolve and we learn more about what activities are effective, further improvements will emerge in our efforts to build learning communities online. While the module appeared successful for our graduate students, there is still room for growth if we are to build enduring learning communities for those enrolled in online programs.

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