Strategies to support community building to increase engagement and to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous, continuous-entry online learning environments to meet the needs of middle school-aged learners

by

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We accept the Process Paper as conforming to the required standard.

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Learning and teaching online present challenges unique to the digital environment. Informed by research, this paper intends to address some of those challenges by addressing the Critical Challenge Question, “How to support community building to increase engagement and to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous, continuous-entry online learning environments to meet the needs of middle school-aged learners?” The findings of this paper have been applied in the creation of two virtual entities, a virtual homeroom and a program companion website. The intent of the homeroom is to build community amongst learners by providing structured opportunities for students build social connections with their teacher and peers. The program companion website will provide a secure platform for resources and other support tools. Overall feedback validated the two project builds and anticipated that the goals would be realized. Limitations for implementing this project revolve around time, availability and student and parent buy-in. Future research is needed to support the necessity of, and best practices for, creating online environments that foster community engagement.

Program Companion Website: https://portal.sd72.bc.ca/class/y6jkd1a/Pages/default.aspx
Virtual Homeroom: https://eblend.sd72.bc.ca/course/view.php?id=560
(These sites are only available with SD72 login credentials)

Keywords: engagement, community, online learning, asynchronous, synchronous, continuous entry
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family and friends, especially my husband Chris, for your love, patience and for your never-ending support. Through the many hours spent researching, writing and developing my Major Project, your understanding throughout this process has been so greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank my fellow students and instructors in the OLTD program. It has been an amazing journey and I am grateful to have worked with and learned so much from you all. To my daughter Anna, who was born half way through the first year of the OLTD program, you are my light and my inspiration to be better person, I love you more than I can say. Finally, my thanks to Darrell Latourneau, I am incredibly grateful for your guidance and support throughout this process.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Background Information

British Columbia has offered distance education programs through correspondence since 1919. Online learning options first became available in the early 1990s and since then online learning and blended learning has grown in popularity. In 2008 roughly 7.5 percent of students were enrolled in at least one distributed learning course (Winkelmans, T., Anderson, B., and Barbour, M., 2010). In the 2016-2017 school year, out of approximately 635 000 K-12 students in the province of British Columbia, 63 000 were participating in some form of online learning (Barbour, M., & LaBonte, R., 2017). Online learning allows students to learn at a place, a pace and a time of their choosing and students are increasingly turning to an online option, for either a single course or an entire educational program to take advantage of that flexibility.

The reasons for this can vary greatly from student to student; however, some generalizations can be made. In my observations, there are three broad reasons that compel students, or their families, to choose online learning: academics, social-emotional health and safety, and interests and life circumstances. Students who turn to online learning for academic reasons may not be working at grade level in at least one subject area and want to catch up, they may be bored in school and want to be challenged or to work at a faster pace, or they feel that the traditional school setting is not a good fit for them. Students who chose online learning for social-emotional health and safety reasons may have experienced bullying, or they may have physical or mental health concerns that significantly interfere with their ability to regularly attend a traditional classroom environment. Lastly, interests and life circumstances include involvement in competitive sports, family travel plans, the location of the family home, or the
decision of a homeschool family to access supports or resources from a certified teacher (The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning, 2017).

Supporting students in an online learning environment and helping them to be successful is a multifaceted challenge faced by teachers. Just as with a traditional classroom setting, students who come to online learning also bring with them a wide range of skills, abilities, past experiences, background knowledge, and family circumstances that can influence their success as learners. Adding to the complex nature of online teaching and learning is the fact that many K-12 programs are asynchronous, allow for continual entry and teachers can be responsible for facilitating multiple grades, as well as multiple courses. However, when it comes to K-12 online learners, there is little research done on students prior to entering high-school that can be directly applied to respond to that challenge (Barbour, M., 2017; DiPietro, 2010., Rice, 2006).

Critical Challenge Question

Supporting middle school-aged students in an online environment presents a critical challenge. A wealth of research links student success and engagement, both in an online and in a traditional face-to-face setting, to the creation of a strong classroom community. As a result, this Major Project has been driven by the question, ‘How to build community engagement to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous and continuous entry online learning environments to meet the needs of middle school-aged learners?’

Purpose of the Major Project

For the past six years I have been working as part of the eBlend Home Learning Program in School District 72, Campbell River, BC. During that time, my teaching colleague and I have worked diligently to update and improve our instructional program. We have moved from a
reliance on paper-based material to more online resources. We made changes to assessment practices so that the emphasis is on assessment for learning, rather than of learning. We have also worked to update the curriculum and resources to better align with BC’s redesigned curriculum. However, there is still much to do in order increase student success.

The students that I work with are in Grade 5 through Grade 9 and come to home learning for a wide variety of reasons. Over the years, fewer students from what could be considered traditional homeschool families are enrolling. Traditional home learning families are those who have made a decision to learn primarily from home because that is what works best for their family values and at least one parent is committed to providing daily instruction. These families come to eBlend because they are looking for the support of a certified teacher to ensure their child learns the provincial curriculum. Every year more non-traditional home learning students are coming to eBlend because something about the face-to-face classroom environment is not working, and they need somewhere else to go to meet their educational needs. My experience is that many of these students cite mental health or anxiety as the main reason that they are unable to attend a traditional school setting. Additionally, for the majority of these students, they do not have the same level of parental support as the students who come from more traditional home learning families. As a result, student success across the eBlend Program varies greatly.

With the program changes that have already been made, the area that I feel will have the greatest positive impact on student learning is by building a strong classroom community, similar to what is done in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. Building classroom community is not a straightforward proposition as there are a variety of complexifying factors in our learning program. The factors that attract families to the program are also those that
inherently make building community and connections challenging. Entry is continuous and new students can enroll at any time throughout the school year, with very few exceptions. In my experience, the number of students enrolled in Grades 5-9 doubles by the end of the school year. Students are each asynchronously working on their own individualized learning plans and are progressing at their own pace to achieve their educational goals. The majority of students are not completing a full course load and are not addressing learning outcomes from all subject areas. Most students focus on completing academic courses, with some only focusing on Math and English and still others are striving to catch up in a least one subject area. Very few students address learning outcomes from the subjects that are considered electives. Because of the multi-grade, continuous entry and asynchronous nature of the program, there are few opportunities for peer interactions and even fewer opportunities for students to feel that they are part of a larger learning community.

**Justification of the Major Project**

Although online learning continues to grow in popularity, it does not play a large part in teacher education programs (Barbour, 2017; Barbour et al, 2011; DiPietro, 2010; DiPietro, Ferdig, Black & Preston, 2008). Supporting K-12 students in an online environment presents challenges that may not themselves be unique, but require unique solutions. What works in a face-to-face classroom environment often does not translate the same in an online environment. Community building, creating a safe learning space and a sense of connectedness amongst learners and between learners and the teacher, is an integral part of a successful classroom environment, whether that classroom is bricks and mortar or virtual.
A review of key literature shows that K-12 online learning is an emergent area of study and that it is necessary to apply research done in other contexts such as adult online education and the K-12 traditional school environment (Barbour, M., 2017). One particular area of research to be further explored is how to establish the types of caring relationships and sense of community in an online environment, as compared to what can be done in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Borup, J., Graham, C., & Velasquez, A., 2013). In chapter 2 Literature Review I will specifically explore strategies that will build community to increase engagement amongst middle school-aged online learners.

**Overview of the Project**

To answer the problem posed by my Critical Challenge Question, findings compiled from Chapter 2: Literature Review as well my learning throughout the Online Learning and Teaching graduate Diploma (OLTD) program, offered by Vancouver Island University, were used to guide the development of my Major Project. The purpose of this project was to create a way to bring students together who are working at a distance from each other, asynchronously, and on their own individual learning paths through different grade levels to increase social presence.

**Key Deliverables**

For my Major Project I designed and created a virtual space using the online platform Moodle to act as a virtual homeroom and give students a shared learning forum. Additionally, because students in the eBlend program typically do not complete a full course load and do not address elective areas of the curriculum, I chose to use learning outcomes from Career Education, Applied Skills and Design Technologies and Fine Arts as the lens through which I created learning opportunities to focus on community building. In this virtual space students in
all grades have opportunities to get to know each other, develop ePortfolios, participate in group discussions, and share their learning with an authentic audience in a variety of ways.

**Definition of Terms**

In this paper, a few terms required further elucidation. The table below provides definitions of key terms used throughout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Any program that is accessed over an internet connection and may be web-based, cloud-based, or internet based</td>
<td><a href="https://www.techopedia.com/definition/26002/web-based-application">https://www.techopedia.com/definition/26002/web-based-application</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended Learning Environment</td>
<td>When online and face-to-face teaching combine</td>
<td><a href="https://www.edglossary.org/blended-learning/">https://www.edglossary.org/blended-learning/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Community</td>
<td>Describes the sense of belonging felt by connected students when a safe and caring learning environment has been established</td>
<td><a href="https://study.com/academy/lesson/building-community-in-the-classroom-strategies-and-activities.html">https://study.com/academy/lesson/building-community-in-the-classroom-strategies-and-activities.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed Learning</td>
<td>Flexible learning opportunities provided through the use of</td>
<td><a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>technology that allows students to learn at their own rate, time and place</strong></td>
<td><strong>training/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/distributed-learning</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Face-to-face classroom</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the traditional physical classroom setting where students attend school daily</td>
<td><a href="https://www.colleges.co.za/face-to-face-learning">https://www.colleges.co.za/face-to-face-learning</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Learning</strong></td>
<td>When learning is done in the home and the educational program is delivered by a family member with the support of certified teacher</td>
<td><a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeschooling</strong></td>
<td>The decision of a family to conduct and develop their own educational program at home, without supervision of a certified teacher, and without the requirement of meeting provincial learning standards</td>
<td><a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling</a></td>
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<td>Learning Management System (LMS)</td>
<td>Describes the software for delivering online learning</td>
<td><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_management_system">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_management_system</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Learning</td>
<td>Describes distance education made possible through the use of the internet and online tools</td>
<td><a href="https://www.online.liverpool.ac.uk/resource/defining-online-learning">https://www.online.liverpool.ac.uk/resource/defining-online-learning</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>A person who is responsible for caring for a child at home</td>
<td><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parent">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parent</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plug-in</td>
<td>A software component that adds additional features or extensions to an existing program</td>
<td><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plug-in_(computing)">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plug-in_(computing)</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Homeschool Family</td>
<td>For the purposes of this paper, one that has consciously chosen for their child’s educational program to be delivered at home from Kindergarten onward</td>
<td><a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/homeschooling</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional Distance</td>
<td>The perceived distances between teacher and student</td>
<td><a href="https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/transactional-distance/30439">https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/transactional-distance/30439</a></td>
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## Major Project Design Timeline

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<th>Proposed Completion Date</th>
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<td>August 10, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>August 15, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Online Project Build v. 1</td>
<td>August 31, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods</td>
<td>September 30, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Field/Beta Testing and Findings</td>
<td>October 31, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Online Project Build v. 2</td>
<td>November 7, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations</td>
<td>November 23, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish Project and Process Paper for Final Review</td>
<td>November 30, 2018</td>
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Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

While virtual learning environments and online learning have dramatically increased in popularity over the past two decades, research into the phenomenon, especially at the K-12 level, is in its infancy, especially when compared to the abundance of research conducted around tertiary education (Carnahan, C.D., 2012; DiPietro, Ferdic, Black, & Preston, 2008; Moore-Adams, Jones & Cohen, 2016; Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares, & Barbour, 2010).

This analysis of relevant research has addressed the Critical Challenge Question: ‘What strategies can be applied to support community engagement to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous, continuous-entry online learning environments to meet the needs of middle school-aged learners?’ However, because of the lack of available research into online or virtual learning at the K-12 level (specifically middle school), it is necessary to make some inferences and judgements based on other contexts, such as face-to-face environments and blended and online high school and post-secondary settings. There is a growing need for more research into what the differences are between teaching in face-to-face environments and teaching in virtual environments to inform what best practice is for those very different teaching settings (Moore-Adams, Jones, & Cohen, 2016). The paucity of research reveals a gap in the literature that I will attempt to begin to address through my major project design and deliverables. The overarching theme that emerged from the literature is that while the course completion metric can be used to provide one measure of achievement, long term success is ultimately dependent on the sense of community and the relationships that are deliberately curated by the teacher to foster engagement.
Engagement

What is engagement? Engagement is a multidimensional concept that has no easy
definition because much depends on context. It is generally agreed that engagement
encompasses three facets: emotional, behavioural and cognitive (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010,
Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). These three facets of engagement are intertwined as each aids in
the development of the others and “examining the components of engagement individually
separates students' behavior, emotion, and cognition,” when “in reality these factors are
dynamically interrelated within the individual; they are not isolated processes (Fredricks, J., &
engagement concerning middle school learners:

Engagement is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses students’ sense of
belonging and connectedness...their sense of agency, self-efficacy...their
involvement, effort, levels of concentration and interest in subjects and learning in
general; and the extent to which learning is enjoyed for its own sake...Further,
engagement is a variable state of being that is influenced by a range of internal and
external factors including the perceived value or relevance of the learning and the
presence of opportunities for students to experience appropriately-pitched challenge
and success in their learning ( p. 10).

The relationship that the teacher builds with middle school aged students is possibly the most
significant factor in fostering student engagement (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Louwrens & Hartnett,
2015). This relationship creates a sense of belonging and connectedness that contributes to the
development of a safe learning environment, which in turn supports a student’s emotional
connection (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Edwards, 2017). When students are learning at a distance the teacher needs to be particularly diligent to build relationships to foster engagement due to the transactional distance and many distractions students often encounter (Rice, 2006, as cited by Edwards, 2017, p. 23). Relationship building, or establishing rapport, according to Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012), is the key component to student engagement and success in a virtual learning environment, and it must be crafted deliberately and purposefully.

**Building Relationships**

Students in a virtual setting have chosen online learning and are not required to be physically present in the same way as students in a face-to-face environment. Despite this, in his dissertation, Drysdale makes the case that online teachers can create a sense of community and provide similar levels of student support as those teachers in a face-to-face or blended environment (Drysdale, J.S., 2013). Establishing trusting, personal relationships with students is therefore critically important. Evidence shows that the more contact a teacher has with a student, the more likely that student is to connect, and the greater the chance of her success (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012; Morgan, 2015). Online teachers must get to know their students as individuals and learn about their lives outside of school (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Themelis, 2014; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Moisey and Hughes add that teachers also need to consider student access and familiarity with technology as well as individual educational goals (Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Students need to know that a real person is there to support them (Themelis, 2014) and to know and feel that the teacher cares for them (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010).
In a study conducted by interviewing Canadian distance education teachers, Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares identified six categories of relationship building particular to online learning: “Recognizing the person/individual; Supporting and monitoring; Availability, accessibility, and responsiveness; Non text-based interactions; Tone of interactions; Non-academic conversation/interactions” (p.177). Their study emphasizes the importance of teachers getting to know each student as an individual, with a unique situation, learning preferences and personality that must be taken into consideration. Their study also concluded that the more communication a teacher has with a student, the more likely that student is to contact the teacher regularly and be successful learning online (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). Consideration must be given to community building in online environments because it is the sense of community that retains learners and leads to a greater chance of student success (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012; Rovai, A.P., 2002).

**Community-building strategies.** Some of the strategies used by online teachers to build community are similar to those used by classroom teachers. Effective formative assessment practices are an example of one such meaningful strategy used to build classroom community (Koc Vonderwell & Boboc, 2013). When a teacher actively works with students to determine progress and identify gaps in learning and next steps, students are more likely to feel supported, engaged and connected. Due to the nature of online learning and teaching, it is important to consider strategies carefully. For example, Themelis discusses the need to craft a “teaching persona,” (2014) and suggests that the use of teleconferencing to connect with students goes a long way in building student-teacher relationships; this helps to create unity and establish community in an online class setting. However, not all students who come to online learning are
comfortable using video conferencing technology, so the use of avatars or the use of a preferred type of communication should also be considered. Good communication skills and frequent personal contact are an essential part of building, and maintaining, trusting relationships with students (Themelis, 2014; Barbour 2015). One framework online educators could employ for both creating community and constructing effective online learning opportunities is the Community of Inquiry.

**Community of Inquiry**

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) is a theoretical framework representing the learning process through the development of three presences: cognitive, social and teaching (CoI Framework, n.d.). While most of the research surrounding CoI is focused on post-secondary education, inferences can be made when applying the CoI framework for supporting younger students.

**Cognitive presence.** The cognitive presence describes the element of critical thinking that relates to what degree students are engaged in their learning and “the extent to which participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). In higher education, the cognitive presence is regarded as the most essential of the presences for students (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). This is unlikely to be the case for middle school aged students, who are enrolled in school because they are required to be and have little choice in the subject matter they study (Murphy, E., & Rodriguez-Manzanares, M., 2012). Unlike post-secondary or adult students, children do not yet have the metacognitive strategies to learn independently (Cavanaugh et al, 2004). As Rice suggests, “Younger learners may present
fundamentally different characteristics than their adult counterparts” (Rice, K.L., 2006, p. 433).

To foster cognitive presence in online courses for middle school, teachers need to design learning activities that are engaging and student-centered, that allow for student choice and are relevant to real life (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). Learning opportunities should be perceived by students as being fun and pleasantly challenging. There should also be opportunities for students to participate in discussions with peers and if possible, opportunities for small group work (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). Allowances of asynchronous communication tools can be harnessed to support the development of cognitive presence in online learning. Asynchronous communication allows students time to reflect on others’ and their own responses which can create more opportunities for dialogue as well as overcome the limitations of time and distance that can exist for synchronous communication (Kear, K., 2010). Moreover, in order for there to be a high level of dialogue amongst participants in an online environment, they must become comfortable communicating and relating with one another (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

**Social presence.** Social presence supports the cognitive presence and describes the degree to which learners are able to project their personality and present their real, authentic selves (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Akyol and Garrison (2008) suggest that it is the social presence that is most likely to have the greatest effect on learning and engagement for middle school aged students. Adolescence is a critical period of development where social and emotional learning plays a vital role (Domitrovich, C.E., Syvertsen, A. K. & Calin, S. S., 2017). To foster social presence, teachers need to create a safe and inclusive learning environment (Akyol & Garrison, 2008); teachers also need to encourage interaction amongst
students (Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015). Opportunities for discussion and collaboration amongst peers are also important, so long as students feel that they are interacting with real people. In an asynchronous online learning environment, fostering social presence can be particularly challenging. When the online environment includes multiple grades and continuous enrollment, fostering social presence is crucial and needs to be done thoughtfully and deliberately. Intentionally building and maintaining a sense of community is a factor critical to student engagement and success (Akyol & Garrison, 2008).

**Teaching presence.** The teaching presence is comprised of two facets; the first includes design, presentation and development of a course, and the second relates to facilitation of that course. Together these function to support the cognitive and social presences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). To cultivate a strong teaching presence, online teachers need to have digital literacy skills and should be able to provide or rely on, significant technical support. At the very least, teachers must be skilled in the basic uses of technology and show an interest in new and emerging technology and tools (DiPietro et al., 2008). A strong knowledge of the content areas, as well as supplemental support tools, will help the online teacher to facilitate learning and accommodate the wide range of student learning needs (2008). Online courses need to take into account students’ diverse learning styles and allow students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. Teachers will need to differentiate and scaffold the learning for the variety of tech-skills, which students will need to be successful online learners (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). Students may need to be taught everything from how to upload a document to participating appropriately and responsibly in an online discussion forum.
Online teachers need to be readily available to students who require assistance, whether through email, messaging, video-conferencing, phone calls or even face-to-face interaction. This requires that online teachers need to have more flexibility with their time and when and how they are available to students (DiPietro et al., 2008). Teachers also need to provide timely responses and feedback which encourage students to maintain their motivation and engagement (DiPietro et al., 2008, Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015). Research has shown that the more contact and communication, the greater student success and learning (Morgan, 2015; DiPietro, M., 2010). Tony Bates affirms that ongoing and continuing communication between teacher and student is essential to online learning (Bates, T., 2015). In particular, it is evident that good communication skills and personal contact have an impact on the development of all three presences (Themelis, 2008). In addition to providing students with a variety of timely communication formats, online teachers of adolescents also need to use the same strategies to communicate with their parents (Currie-Rubin, R., and Smith, S., 2014; Stevens, M., and Borup, J., 2015).

When younger students participate in online learning, unlike learners in the post-secondary context, support from parents or guardians at home is a key factor in success (Edwards, 2017). Online teachers need to get to know their students as individuals and communicate with them regularly; additionally, it is vital to connect similarly with the student’s support at home (Borup, J., West, R., Graham, C., and Davies, R., 2014; Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014; Edwards, 2017). Edwards notes it is essential that teachers establish a trusting relationship with parents and guardians, as working together they can best support the child (Edwards, 2017). Parents must assume more responsibilities when their child learns online and
require the teacher to help them determine what their role should include (Morgan, 2015). For these reasons, the teaching presence needs to extend beyond the online course and beyond the students, and connect meaningfully to the parents. Online learning is likely to continue to grow and it will become increasingly necessary for teachers to be properly equipped to engage and to support students and their parents (Currie Rubin & Smith, 2014).

A student’s support system at home plays a critical role in student success and engagement in online learning. However, the important role of parents and guardians is not part of the CoI framework. While it is reasonable to use the CoI framework and adopt ideas and strategies from other contexts to help in development of the three presences, it is also useful to consider other conceptual frameworks.

Adolescent Community of Engagement (ACE) Framework

The Adolescent Community of Engagement was developed by Borup, West, Graham and Davies, in response to the CoI, in order to acknowledge the unique adolescent online environment and learner, and to identify and include the significant role of the parent. This framework identifies four elements that make up an adolescent online learning environment: student engagement, teacher engagement, peer engagement and parent engagement (Borup, J., West, R., Graham, C., & Davies, R., 2014). Their hypothesis suggests “As parents, teachers, and peers become more engaged, students are more likely to increase their engagement” (Borup et al., 2014, p. 112). Online teachers need to work and plan carefully to build caring and trusting relationships with their students, with the parents of those students, and between students. When students feel connected to a support network of real people, they are less likely to feel isolated and be disengaged in their learning.
The Role of the Teacher

In the ACE framework developed by Borup et al, the role of the teacher is described similarly to that of the teaching presence outline in the CoI framework. The teacher’s role is to facilitate interaction, organize and design course materials and timelines, and provide students with direct instruction (Borup et al., 2014, p. 113). When effective, teachers are also creating “nurturing student relationships and safe environments, monitoring and motivating student engagement, and facilitating discourse” with students, parents and between peers” (Borup et al., 2014, p. 114). Drysdale describes this type of teacher relationship as one of mentorship. In his case study, teachers were assigned to “shepherd” groups of students where they were to look at the whole student, and not just academic performance (Drysdale, 2013). Teachers in the shepherding program focused on building caring and personal relationships and connections with their students based on life outside of the online courses such as shared interests or hobbies. Drysdale’s analysis “identified several patterns indicating what teachers considered important in building caring relationships: engaging in social interaction and self-disclosure, understanding student background, and determining preferred modes of communication” (2013, p. 17). An important finding of his research was that the caring relationships teachers built with their students went both ways; teachers who had a mentorship role reported “positive increases to job satisfaction, responsibility, motivation and mental peace” (2013, p. 23). Building caring relationships with students is the first step to creating the conditions for the community engagement which ultimately leads to greater student success.

The online teacher is also a facilitator, promoting content and peer interaction as well as communication and discourse. Teachers act as monitors to make sure that students are making
progress and getting help and support as they need it. Celebrating successes and using praise are strategies that can be used for motivation (Drysdale, 2013). Communication and collaboration with parents when students need support is also key. To encourage content interaction, teachers need to accommodate different learning preferences by ensuring students are able to access content and resources easily and through different modalities, as well as providing opportunities for students to show their learning in a variety of ways (DiPietro, 2010). When possible, learning should be individualized, tailored to individual needs and relevant to real life (DiPietro, 2010). Teachers also need to encourage, acknowledge and reinforce the importance of student contributions to discussions and group tasks as well as encouraging students to support each other (de la Varre, C., Keane, J., & Irvin, M., 2011; DiPietro, 2010).

As a manager of an online course, teachers must maintain academic integrity, adapt course materials as necessary, and provide clear expectations to both students and their parents (DiPietro, 2010). It can be challenging to monitor for cheating or plagiarism when students are distant from the teacher; the relationship that teachers can build with parents can support this need.

The Role of the Parent

In the ACE framework, parents have critical role. Parental engagement is recognized as a key component to student success in an online learning environment. According to Borup et al., parents are responsible for providing a safe and nurturing environment, for monitoring and motivating student engagement on a daily basis and for demonstrating the value of education through actions such as volunteering at the school (Borup et al., 2014; Stevens, M., & Borup, J. 2015). Additionally parents must engage in frequent and collaborative communication with the
teacher to discuss their child’s challenges, successes and progress (Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014).

Parental involvement and engagement are critical to student success in an online environment (Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014). Because online teachers do not regularly work with their students in person, they rely on a parent (or guardian) to provide monitoring of on-task behaviour, checking for understanding and other such things that occur on a daily basis in a traditional face-to-face classroom. A study by Frid determined that students who had an adult acting as a mentor were more likely to be active and engaged learners throughout the entirety of a course and that their work was done with more depth (Frid, S., 2001). In a review of the literature around parent engagement in the K-12 online setting, Stevens and Borup found that parental engagement is on a continuum, from being absentee to the completion of work for the student. They also found that parents tend not to fully understand their role and underestimated its importance (Stevens & Borup, 2015). These findings further emphasize the important responsibility of the online teacher to build relationships and a social presence with parents.

The critical role of the parent in the ACE framework relates directly to the CoI construct; if teachers are able to build a sense of social presence with parents and establish a strong relationship, then parents and teachers will be more likely to communicate effectively and collaboratively and work together to support the student (Stevens & Borup, 2015). When working to create relationships with parents, teachers need to mindful that when parents are new to online learning, their background often includes either their own or their child’s negative experiences at school; “Parents may be running from the challenges of a brick-and-mortar school, not necessarily to an online classroom (Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014, p. 121). Teachers
should work to create relationships where parents and teachers have an equal footing. Personalized conversations and regular communication are a powerful tool to create meaningful and trusting parent-teacher relationships (Stevens and Borup, 2015; Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014; Edwards, 2017). Parents also need to know what their role is so that they can better understand their responsibilities and respond to their child’s needs.

For various reasons, not all parents are able to provide their child with the level or kind of support that their child needs to be successful in an online learning environment. Teachers must work to support parents, as well as their students, which is why it is critical for families to “feel welcomed and appreciated for whatever level or type of involvement they provide” (Currie-Rubin and Smith, 2014). To support parents in their new role, online teachers can include face-to-face meetings - especially at the beginning of the year - webinars (Stevens and Borup, 2015) and other resources made available online such as a parent handbook or FAQ (frequently asked questions) webpage. Online teacher also need to support parents by providing them with strategies to support their child’s learning (Morgan, 2015).

**The Role of Peers**

For adolescents, peers can have a great influence. For that reason the ACE framework describes the role of peers to be one of instruction, collaboration and motivation (Borup et al, 2014). When social presence has been established and students feel comfortable interacting with each other online, peers can play a role in instruction by providing assistance and support and sharing ideas (Frid, S., 2001). Peer expectations also play a role in motivation when it comes to engaging in discussions or group activities (Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015). In Frid’s research study it was found that peer interactions increased motivation as students found it exciting to
share with each other (2001). Students want and need a sense of belonging that comes from being part of a connected group (Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010) and peer interactions that are guided by the teacher facilitate this. According to Swan and Shea (2005), learning is fundamentally social in nature and always includes interactions between people, “whether direct or mediated” (p. 242).

**The Social Presence Model**

Social connections help foster student success but it can be particularly challenging to create those connections in an online learning environment. The Social Presence Model presents a framework that teachers can use to build community and connectedness in an online environment by establishing social presence. Drawing from the CoI, Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside and Lewis (2012) define social presence as a combination of affective association, community cohesion, integration intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor involvement.

Affective association refers to the connections that can develop through instances of emotion (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012; Whiteside, A., 2015). Emotional connections occur when members of the learning community convey personal emotion, use humor and share about themselves. This might be done through the use of text features, such as boldface or italicized fonts or all capital letters for emphasis, through use of punctuation, such as an ellipsis to communicate uncertainty or exclamation marks to convey excitement, or even the use of emojis (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012; Whiteside, A., 2015). When audio and visual elements can be included in an online course, it further helps students and teachers to build emotional connections through being able to hear and see each other. Instances of emotion help online students to perceive that they are communicating and connecting with real people.
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING

(Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012; Themelis, 2014). When students feel an emotional connection to others they are more likely to be invested in the course and learn from the community (Kear, K. 2010; Conrad and Donaldson, 2004, as cited by Whiteside, A., 2015).

Community cohesion expands on the idea of emotional connection to describe the degree to which students feel that they are part of a learning community (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012). To help students feel they belong to a larger group, it is important for teachers to focus on creating positive social spaces by helping students to get to know each other from the beginning (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012; Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015; Whiteside, 2015; Kear, 2010). One strategy is to create member profiles to help students develop a sense of each other (Kear, 2010). Finding ways to celebrate achievements or special moments as a group can also build community cohesion.

Integration intensity describes the level of interaction amongst course participants. This includes acknowledgements, agreements, disagreements, compliments, questions, use of names and use of tools to communicate (Whiteside, 2015; Lowenthal, P., and Parscal, T., 2008). To facilitate interaction amongst students, teachers need to model what that looks like and provide clear criteria for how to do so using a variety of social tools. They also need to monitor public areas of communication and provide encouragement and motivation for students to contribute to discourse (DiPietro et al, 2008). Online discussions need to have interactions that are frequent and timely so that discussions can be sustained. They must also be “convenient, familiar, accessible, meaningful and focused” (Swan and Shea, 2005, p. 246).

Knowledge and experience involve the sharing of additional resources and experiences by both the teacher and the students (Whiteside, 2015; Lowenthal, P., and Parscal, T.,
Leading by example, teachers can share additional resources that they find. For example, teachers can model ways to engage with a variety of online tools or students can share their favourite tools to use. They can also discuss their own experiences which in turn encourages students to be willing to share about themselves. These types of actions help participants see each other as real people which is central to the development of social presence (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012).

Lastly, instructor involvement is the most critical element to the Social Presence Model. A teacher needs to be “invested and active in the learning community” (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012, p. 23) in order for social presence to be established and maintained and to create positive social spaces. Students need to know that the teacher is consistently an active participant in the online learning community. There are numerous strategies that teachers can apply to do this. Frequently using a range of communication tools to keep in regular contact with students and their supports at home is a cornerstone. Feedback should be timely and personalized (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2012). The use of voice or video recordings have been shown to be much more impactful than text-based feedback and communication (Pacansky-Brock, M., 2018; Riedel, C., 2014). The online teacher is the most critical element to creating maintaining a learning environment that supports student learning through the development of social presence.

The Online Environment

Even though online education presents a vastly different mode of delivery than the traditional classroom setting, traditional pedagogical practices and theory are still relevant (Carnahan, 2012). Effective online teachers mix pedagogy, technology and content to create
quality learning experiences; it is and should be, a major shift from the experiences in a face to face classroom (Di Pietro et al., 2008). In his research, Carnahan (2012) found that the mode of delivery had little effect on student achievement and further highlighted the importance of good pedagogy and the key role teachers have in the design and delivery process. As emphasized by Rice and Bates, good design principles combined with good pedagogy are essential; the course platform used is largely irrelevant when those two factors are applied (Bates, 2015; Rice, 2006). A search through relevant research does not show a consensus about whether or not K-12 students learn more or less in an online learning environment than in a face-to-face setting. Whether or not a student finds success learning online, depends on the teacher, which is a similar case to traditional bricks-and-mortar classrooms.

There should be no doubt that the success of online students rests largely on the shoulders of the teacher. However, as Rice (2006) points out, “The undeniable fact is that some students succeed in the virtual educational environment and some fail just as they do in traditional classroom environments” (p. 432). Just as in traditional classroom settings, there are factors outside the control of the teacher that impact a student’s chances of success in an online educational program. To create the conditions that will maximize student success, teachers must thoughtfully and purposefully create the online learning environment. This environment needs to be a safe space where students feel at ease sharing their thoughts and ideas and feel supported by a positive community culture (Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015). As Kear (2010) suggests, “unless students feel comfortable in an online environment, they may not participate openly, and so may not gain the benefits that an online learning community can provide” (p. 3).
In the beginning of an online course or program, activities should be focused on creating social presence to develop a safe learning space and sense of community (Louwrens and Hartnett, 2015). In addition to social presence, Rovai (2002) describes seven other essential factors for building a sense of community online: transactional distance, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size. While his research was done within the post-secondary context, it is reasonable to apply his findings to the K-12 environment. Transactional distance refers to the perceived distance between teacher and student (Moore, 2003, in Rovai 2002). Social equality is achieved when instructors provide students with equal opportunities to participate in discourse and ensure that proper etiquette is followed. Small group activities present students with opportunities to work with each other collaboratively which lends to building a sense of community. Online teachers need to facilitate the development and maintenance of the group community by acting through different roles such as “encourager, harmonizer, compromiser, gatekeeper, standard setter, observer, or follower” (Rovai, 2002, para. 18). Teaching style and learning stage refers to the ability of the teacher to meet the varying needs of diverse learners. Community size is the final factor listed by Rovai to consider when building a sense of community online. There is no magic number for community size, but it should be large enough to generate interactions and small enough as to not be overwhelming. In order for learning to take place, building community engagement must be a continuous undertaking.

Conclusions

Research into online learning at the middle school level is still emerging as the majority of studies relating to online learning have been conducted around post-secondary education.
Research at the middle school level has relied largely on case studies done in the United States. Despite this relative lack of research, however, one thing is clear—the most significant element in supporting community building and increasing student engagement is the relationship that a teacher builds with students and their parents or guardians. Through deliberate actions, teachers must build and work to maintain personal and trusting relationships. This can be achieved through a careful and purposeful selection of pedagogically sound strategies that work together to foster and develop the cognitive presence, teaching presence, and most importantly, the social presence.

**Gaps in Research**

Most research assumes online teachers work with specific grades or content areas and has been done within the context of high schools, examining large American virtual charter schools. However, within the province of BC, most school districts offer various types of online learning for K-12 students (Barbour and LaBonte, 2017). As result, many Distributed Learning (DL) teachers must accommodate a wide span of grades and subject areas and cannot possibly be content experts in all areas (Barbour, M., and Adelstein, D., 2013).

This review of the literature has made it clear that online learning programs for middle school students need to focus on building a sense of community with strong relationships in order to encourage engagement and increase success. To address the Critical Challenge Question posed, efforts will be focused on applying strategies that will support the development and maintenance of teaching and social presences as a foundation to building an online community of learners. Skills and strategies learned through the OLTD program, along with findings from this review, will be applied to create a virtual space that will address the
challenges presented by a multi-grade, asynchronous, continuous-entry online learning environment towards increased student motivation, engagement and success. The design of two virtual spaces will serve as the key deliverables for the Major Project component of this graduate study and will be further detailed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3 – Procedures and Methods

The Project Proposal

Throughout the years that I have been working as a distributed learning educator in the eBlend program, I have worked closely with colleagues to make improvements to the program in order to better support student learning. However, with the challenges brought on by a multi-grade, asynchronous, continuous-entry online learning environment for middle school-aged learners, it became evident that more than just the resources and materials needed to change. The task felt insurmountable and I struggled to choose an area of focus. I felt daunted by all the changes that I wanted to make in order to better align the eBlend program with my beliefs about teaching and learning.

One particular aspect that I long struggled with in my practice was how to increase engagement and success of online students. My experience was that many students in the eBlend program were learning online not because it best aligned with student needs and family values, but because it was where they ended up by individual circumstance. This meant that student and parent engagement in learning could differ greatly from student to student.

The seed for the idea of my major project came when I was first introduced to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model and its focus on three presences. Something resonated with me and I knew that the CoI, and particularly the social and teaching presences, were going to hold the key. I came to understand that building community engagement through the development of the social and teaching presences was going to be the driving factor behind my Major Project development.
Major Project Development

The Major Project was designed to address the critical challenge question, ‘How to build community engagement to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous and continuous entry online learning environments?’ Many students in the eBlend Home Learning Program are fairly isolated from their peers and there is little sense of community felt amongst them. There is an opportunity for students to attend class at least once a week, but many are unable to attend regularly, if at all, due to diverse factors such as driving distance and mental health concerns. Each student is also working on their own individualized Learning Plan asynchronously and at their own pace. Additionally, there may be only one or two students taking a particular online course at a time which makes meaningful peer interactions through course activities, such as discussion forums, challenging. It is difficult for students to make and maintain connections with peers, or their teacher, when there are few and irregular opportunities for face-to-face or virtual interactions.

To address the critical challenge question, a decision was made to create a virtual space that would bring all the students together, regardless of grade, for semi-synchronous learning activities. A virtual home room was created with the objective that all students in Grades 5 through 9 would have opportunities to participate in the same weekly and monthly activities. The intent was to create a welcoming space that all students would share in common with the goal of building a sense of community, therefore increasing engagement amongst a group of diverse learners.

The main purpose of the virtual homeroom was to build community engagement through provision of opportunities for students to share about themselves and to learn about others in the
eBlend community, including the teacher. The aim was to increase and develop both the teaching presence and the social presence.

**Major Project Design and Considerations**

**The virtual homeroom.** Moodle was the platform chosen to house the creation of the virtual homeroom. Several factors contributed to this decision. Firstly, Moodle is currently used by the school district as the Learning Management System for online courses, which meant students would be familiar with it and would not require an additional log in or training. Secondly, all Moodle courses are stored on school district servers, which removes various potential privacy concerns. Thirdly, Moodle contains many tools and plug-ins that can be used to assist with building community activities, such as discussion forums, that do not require the use of additional outside applications.

To increase buy-in from students and parents alike, it was decided to develop activities through the lens of achieving learning outcomes from the curricular areas of Career Education and Applied Design and Skills Technologies, and linking those activities to the learning opportunities that happen during Wednesday Interaction days. In my experience, these are two of the subjects areas typically left largely unaddressed by students in the eBlend program. Focusing on core academic subjects such as Mathematics, Science, English Language Arts and Social Studies is all that most students can address.

The first step was to create the shell of the homeroom in Moodle and then decide how to organize activities so that students would complete them roughly around the same time. At the top of the homepage I included an introductory section which provides students with an overview of expectations, announcements, a general discussion forum and a resources page (see
Appendix A). I divided the activities up by term and additionally separated them monthly within each term. I also decided that I would hide future activities from student view so that students could not get ahead of the group and to keep the page from being too busy. I did not want students to feel overwhelmed by the number of weekly tasks that to returning students and parents especially, could seem like too much of an additional workload on top of their academic coursework. I wanted to ensure that it would appear manageable and that students would find the tasks engaging and interesting.

**Activities for building community.** With the exception of September, each month’s activities were organized in a similar format so that students would not have to relearn how to navigate through the homeroom (Appendix B). September is a soft start because eBlend teachers need to prioritize meeting with each student and their family in order to create personalized Learning Plans. For families new to home learning, it can also take a few weeks to find their rhythm and determine what learning at home will actually look like for them. The activities in the first month were designed to get students familiar with expectations and with each other, without being onerous. In September, students learned how to create their own user profiles, participate respectfully in a discussion forum, and how to set up their student blogs.

For every month from October-June, two discussion forums were scheduled. The goal of each discussion forum was for students and the teacher to safely disclose selected personal information that would in turn lead to improved social and teaching presences by increasing the sense that there are real, authentic people to interact with online. To ensure students knew how to participate respectfully in a discussion forum, a lesson about sharing ethics was developed. Students were shown how to share something, how to acknowledge someone who has shared,
and how to agree and disagree respectfully. Clear consequences for noncompliance were outlined. Additionally, behind the scenes encouragement was used, through celebration of individual student participation and gentle reminders to participate, sent through Moodle’s messaging tool.

Ahead of every Wednesday Interaction day where a scheduled lesson could be completed at home, a lesson book became available in the homeroom for students to review (See Appendix C). Students who were going to attend had an idea of what learning activity would take place, and students who could not attend were still able to participate. Students who completed an activity at home were asked to share about what they did in a blog post. For example, the very first Art lesson of the school year was posted to the homeroom and students who were unable to attend that day completed the activity at home and shared pictures of their paintings online.

At the end of each month, students were required to complete a reflection about their learning and to set a goal for the next month (See Appendix D). Reflections were created with the SD72 Learning Progressions in mind. School District 72 has moved away from traditional grade based report cards and provides monthly communication of student learning using district created rubrics that align with Learning Progressions.

The companion program website. To support the virtual homeroom, a companion eBlend website was created (See Appendix E). To be mindful of privacy concerns, the website was created using the district Sharepoint site, which is housed on local servers, and is accessible only to students who are enrolled in the eBlend home learning program through a secure login. The website’s landing page has a quick links section for students to easily access their online courses and additional online supports. The landing page also includes a calendar,
announcements, newsletters, and a featured stories section. The calendar includes all upcoming school events, field trips, Interaction days, office hours and holidays. The announcements sections allows students to quickly see the next few upcoming events or other pertinent information, such as opportunities to be involved in community events. The featured stories section covers upcoming events such as school picture day and new shared learning activities such as opportunities to take part in woodworking on Fridays.

From the landing page students are able to access the Wednesday Blog, their own and others’ blogs, and their own digital ePortfolios. The Wednesday Blog (See Appendix F) is written at the end of each Interaction day and shares the activities that took place along with pictures, links or other related media. The purpose of the Wednesday Blog is to create another link between those students who were able to attend and those who were not. The Blog Posts also contain instructions on how to participate from home, possible activity extensions, and how and where to share with the whole group. The Wednesday Blog also provides another venue through which teaching presence could be developed and is also posted to the announcements section of the Virtual Homeroom.

Students were asked to create a their own blogs that would introduce themselves to other students in the eBlend community; these blogs showcase their learning or achievements throughout the school year and are designed to increase student ownership of learning, providing a further way for students to present their authentic selves and learn about and make connections with each other. For example, several students in the program have made connections through sharing pictures of their family pets on their blogs and another student has used her blog to showcase her many art projects.
Throughout the course of the school year, students gather evidence of learning in subject areas outside of their core academics. This is aided through the use of guided instructions in the Virtual Homeroom, with the goal of addressing learning outcomes for Applied Design, Skills and Technologies (ADST). To gather evidence and to support the achievement of ADST learning outcomes, students will build digital portfolios. ePortfolios are a place for students to record and showcase work, as well as reflect on and share their learning.

**Major Project Implementation**

In order to effectively implement the Major Project, it was necessary to make some changes in my practice that would better support the community building endeavors and increase opportunities for the development of a teaching presence. One small change was to create a communication tracking spreadsheet to ensure weekly contact was made with students or their parents. I also limited group emails, instead taking the time to send individual emails addressed to students and their parents. I also made sure to communicate with students and their families using their preferred method of communication. For example, I set aside time for weekly phone calls with several families. Furthermore, I increased opportunities for interactions, both face-to-face and virtually. In years past, a drop-in time was aside for students two afternoons a week. This year, that time increased to two days a week, where students were encouraged and welcome to attend a supported work space. For those unable to attend, virtual office hours were established and made available by appointment. One final tool that I used to increase my presence was to create an avatar (See Appendix G) which I used to personalize messages and add a sense of personality to emails, blog posts, discussion forums, online lessons and other forms of digital communication.
Feedback Process

The construction of the Major Project deliverables took place during October, 2018. Feedback was solicited using an anonymous Google Form from colleagues within my school and district and also from colleagues within the MEdL community. The review process occurred over the course of 10 days, after which feedback was compiled and discussed in chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Field/Beta Testing and Findings

Overall Intention of the Project

My goal for this project build was to answer the Critical Challenge Question: ‘How to build community engagement to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous and continuous entry online learning environments to support the needs of middle school-aged learners?’ In essence, two websites were developed during the process of attempting to answer the Critical Challenge Question. A Virtual Home Room was built in Moodle and a program companion website was built using the school district Sharepoint site. The Virtual Home room was designed to bring students in Grades 5-9 together in common learning space, without regard for grade or academic subject of study. The goal of this was to create a welcoming environment that would build community engagement and develop the social and teaching presences through semi-synchronous and shared learning activities. To increase parent and student buy-in, some activities were designed through the lens of addressing Learning Outcomes from Applied Design, Skills and Technologies, Visual Art and Career Education. The program companion website was built to provide a landing page where students could access all their online course materials, a community calendar, announcements, the program blog, student blogs, student ePortfolios and additional resources.

Field/Beta Testing: Methods and Processes

Once the aspects of the Major Project were developed, a request was made for participants in the review process. Feedback was requested from school district, OLTD and MEdL colleagues to inform final revisions to the Virtual Homeroom. An email invitation was sent out to colleagues asking for participants to review part of the Major Project. The program
companion website could not be shared because it is accessible only to students through a personalized login. Included in the email request was an explanation of the purpose of the Major Project, the Virtual Homeroom URL and login information, and a link to a Google Form. The review process occurred over the course of 10 days, after which the results were reviewed and analyzed. Eleven responses were recorded in total.

A Google Form was created to gather anonymous feedback on aspects of the Virtual Homeroom build. The questionnaire was designed for reviewers to provide critical feedback through answering primarily qualitative feedback questions. The form had five distinct sections: Background Information, Navigation, Content, Social and Teaching Presences, and Final Thoughts. My goal was to determine whether or not my goals were achieved for the Virtual Homeroom to be a place of building community engagement.

**Feedback Questions**

A description of the purpose and goals of the Virtual Homeroom was provided at the beginning of the Google Form. The intent of the questions was to gain critical feedback from colleagues to inform revisions and improvements to the Major Project.

The following questions were included on the form:

1. Please briefly describe your current role.

2. Have you ever taken an online course?

3. If you answered yes to the question above, please comment on your experience in regard to community engagement.

4. Have you ever taught an online course?
5. In your opinion, how important in community engagement, or sense of community, to success in an online learning environment?

6. Please comment on the navigability of the virtual homeroom. Is there anything you would change or add to make it easier to use?

7. Please provide your comments and suggestions on the design aspect of the homeroom (layout headings, font sizes etc.).

8. In your opinion, is the content of the Virtual Homeroom relevant to the intentions?

9. Based on your answer to the previous question, please comment on the problem areas or make suggestions for additions or subtractions.

10. Is the content overwhelming?

11. What the content presented in an engaging way?

12. Do you have any general suggestions to improve content?

13. Do you feel that the activities would provide students with opportunities to learn about each other by disclosing information about themselves in a safe manner? Please share your comments and suggestions.

14. Do you feel that the teacher has a clear presence in the course and do you get the sense that a real person is at the other end? Please share your comments and suggestions.

15. Please include any additional comments that you feel would be relevant feedback for my project.

**Field/Beta Testing Feedback and Findings**

Eleven professionals completed the Google Form and provided me with valuable project feedback.
**Background information.** Question one asked reviewers to describe their current role and eight out of 11 respondents answered. The roles described included two teachers, one administrator, three educational assistants and one MEdL Supervisor. Three Respondents chose not to describe their current role.

Question two prompted ‘Have you ever taken an online course?’ Nine of the 11 respondents had experienced taking an online course.

Question three was optional: ‘If you answered yes to the question above, please comment on your experience in regard to community engagement.’ When commenting on experiences related to community engagement as a student in an online course, responses varied greatly. For one respondent, community engagement was “usually pretty non-existent.” For another, the level of engagement varied greatly from instructor to instructor and course to course. One respondent stated that ‘lasting friendships with a number of fellow students, and with the instructor [were developed].’ Another respondent reflected that “it would have been better had I been assigned to a cohort (even a large one) that I could have interacted with regularly and shared thoughts as we progressed through the course.”

Question four asked of respondents: ‘Have you ever taught an online course? Three of the respondents had previously taught an online course whereas eight had not. This is approximately the ratio that I had been expecting in relation to experiences as an online teacher.

Question five asked: ‘In your opinion, how important in community engagement, or sense of community, to success in an online learning environment?’ Respondents used a rating scale and the results were mixed (See Figure 1).
**Navigation.** Question six asked for response to a question as well as a comment: ‘Please comment on the navigability of the virtual homeroom. Is there anything you would change or add to make it easier to use?’ Overall respondents reported that it was generally easy to figure out the navigation and that everything was well organized. Two respondents expressed concerns that for someone unfamiliar with using the Moodle platform, the way the homeroom is formatted might be confusing.

Question seven prompted a response: ‘Please provide your comments and suggestions on the design aspect of the homeroom (layout headings, font sizes etc.).’ Six respondents commented that the design layout was effective and had no suggestions to offer. One respondent commented that “teacher avatar is appealing and adds character and identity to the experience,” which affirmed my use of an avatar. One respondent suggested that “seemed like a lot of clicking to find things” and another wondered if there was a way to change the formatting so that
everything was not “all in one long list of pages.” In an effort to keep the design of the virtual homeroom similar to the other online courses students are taking, I did try to emulate a similar format.

**Content.** Questions eight and nine asked the following questions: ‘In your opinion, is the content of the Virtual Homeroom relevant to the intentions?’ and ‘Based on your answer to the previous question, please comment on the problem areas or make suggestions for additions or subtractions.’ Ten respondents replied in the affirmative; however one respondent said that “This is hard to answer as I am unsure of what the intentions are.”

![Pie Chart of Results for Survey Question Eight.](image)

**Figure 2.** Pie Chart of Results for Survey Question Eight.

Question 10 asked: ‘Is the content overwhelming?’ Six respondents did not feel that the content was overwhelming.
Figure 3: Pie Chart Results for Survey Question Ten.

Question 11 inquired: ‘Was the content presented in an engaging way?’ Most of the respondents replied that the content was engaging. However, one respondent did not find the content engaging at all.

Question 12 asked for suggestions: ‘Do you have any general suggestions to improve content?’ There were three suggestions offered to improve content. One respondent suggested the use of a “[S]howcase of learning for [students] to add their contributions to a community presentation or slideshow.” A second respondent commented that “student feedback through the successful completion of the activities and anecdotally will be useful and perhaps more relevant to the designer. Well done.” The third respondent recommended the following: “Perhaps add something fun to do - an interactive game or...?”
Social and teaching presences. Question 13 asked: ‘Do you feel that the activities would provide students with opportunities to learn about each other by disclosing information about themselves in a safe manner? Please share your comments and suggestions.’ Ten respondents answered affirmatively. The eleventh respondent was unsure stating that “[I] can only guess at this - some would, some would not.” One respondent shared concerns and said “I would only do this if students have met face-to-face and if the teacher has written parental consent.”

Question 14 asked: ‘Do you feel that the teacher has a clear presence in the course and do you get the sense that a real person is at the other end? Please share your comments and suggestions.’ Seven respondents replied with “Definitely” or “Yes.” One of these respondents suggested that it was “[O]nly because of my experience teaching online courses’ while another said “[H]aving met you in person probably helps me to visualize.” Two respondents made reference to effectiveness of the teacher avatar. Two respondents only somewhat felt the sense of a real person at the other end.

Optional comments. Question 15 asked: ‘Please include any additional comments that you feel would be relevant.’ Only three responses were recorded, but they were positive in nature and all seemed to agree that the virtual homeroom would be an effective addition to the eBlend program as it “as it provides a new way for students to get connected and involved” and will provide them “with plenty of data to mine.”

Significance of Test Findings

The feedback was generally positive and the reviewers generally considered the Virtual Homeroom to be a welcoming and safe environment that would build community engagement and would work well as a common space to bring students together across grade levels. There
were several constructive recommendations provided for improving the project. Overall, I found that most participants determined there was value in the design of the virtual homeroom and companion website that would promote and build community engagement to address my critical challenge question.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Project Overview

My aspiration for this project was to explore and implement strategies to support community building in the eBlend Home Learning Program, a primarily online, asynchronous and multi-grade, middle school learning environment with continuous enrollment. Given the critical presence of the online teacher in successful online learning environments and with the goal of building community, following the CoI, ACE and Social Presence models, I attempted to enhance relationships by improving my teaching presence through the design and facilitation of two virtual spaces. It was hoped this would lead to improved social presence by my students and ultimately, over time, increased cognitive presence as well. My research led me on a journey that led to the instantiation of two online creations, a virtual homeroom and a companion website as my Major Project. Together with this Process Paper, the use of these two forums by my students attempted to answer the critical challenge question “How to build community engagement to address the challenges of multi-grade, asynchronous and continuous entry online learning environments?” through examination of the Community of Inquiry Framework, the Adolescent Community of Engagement Framework, the Social Presence Model, and the application of specific strategies.

During my time with the eBlend Home Learning Program, I worked diligently to make improvements, including updating assessment practices and curricular resources. However, I continually felt overwhelmed by the enormity of trying to improve courses for five different grade levels on my own. During my experiences in the OLTD program, I felt I was missing something vital. I came to the realization that no matter the changes I made, if community
engagement continued to lag, those changes would only go so far towards positively impacting student learning and engagement. With that underlying understanding, I refocused my efforts on building community engagement and finding ways to implement effective strategies of doing so.

I built the Virtual Homeroom so that I could bring all students together in one digital space, regardless of grade level or subject area. I wanted to ensure that students who are unable to attend in person, for whatever reason, would feel part of our community, make connections and get to know their teacher and their peers. To increase buy-in from students and parents, many of the activities were created to address areas of the curriculum, specifically Career Education and Applied Design, Skills and Technologies.

**Project Evaluation**

Eleven respondents completed an anonymous Google Form, the results of which helped to inform the Project redesign. Overall, the feedback and comments were positive and respondents generally agreed that the Virtual Homeroom would likely achieve its objectives and lead to an increase in community engagement. Some feedback was provided and was used to inform revisions. However, I do not feel that much of the feedback was specifically constructive. Upon reflection, this is likely due to the way my questions were presented. I wanted to keep the feedback form short and simple, but perhaps should have offered more information to the reviewers about various aspects and design considerations. Even so, the review process has led me to some useful conclusions and recommendations regarding the overall successes of implementing this project.

The first section of the Google Form collected some background information from the respondents. Of particular interest was the response to the question that asked respondents to
rate how important they felt community engagement was to student success online. The results were quite mixed and begs the question how the responses would differ if the same query were posed about face-to-face learning. These results suggest that community engagement is not considered as critical for online learning as it is for the traditional classroom setting. However, my research has led me to believe that community engagement is even more important to foster in the online context.

The second section of the Google Form focused on aspects of navigation. Several respondents felt that there was not enough embedded instruction that explained how to use Moodle and the ways to navigate through the course. This a concern that I have as well for new students, but try to mediate any confusion about the online learning environment by providing tutorials in person during intake meetings. Additionally, in the “resources” section of the Virtual Homeroom, there is a video that I created which explains the basics of navigating through Moodle. I have since moved the video so that is now located at the top of the course main page. Perhaps this should have been articulated to the survey respondents or the introductory video should have been brought to their attention. However, the purpose of the Virtual Homeroom was not to teach students how to use Moodle. I have outlined additional how-to videos that I plan on developing for students and parents. These videos will be housed on the program companion website.

The third section of the form addressed the content. One respondent expressed concern that the Virtual Homeroom was “very text heavy and seems like each section requires a lot of clicks.” These are concerns of mine as well. I tried to achieve a balance between chunking the information into manageable pieces to avoid the need for much scrolling, with the number of
clicks it takes to get through a section. I plan to include more audio and visual files as I work to continue to develop the Virtual Homeroom. Additionally, in the “resource” section of the Virtual Homeroom, I have included instructions for using assistive technology, such as installing a text-to-speech extension to a Google Chrome browser.

Another respondent asked for a “way not to have it all in one long list of pages.” I tried to format the virtual homeroom in a similar fashion to the other Moodle courses that students use. I attempted to shorten the long list by only revealing one term at a time to students and moving the current term to the top of the page. However, this aspect of the design still leaves a lot to be desired and there are limitations for what can be done within the Moodle platform itself. Because I am currently using the Virtual Homeroom with students, I have postponed the implementation of any substantive changes to the design or formatting.

One responded suggested to “add to the look of the homeroom. Make it exciting - joke of the day. Picture of the day that can be found in the background or corner,” while another suggested using more images to make the homeroom look more inviting. While I feel that a joke or a picture of the day would be too much to manage, I have incorporated the idea of doing something similar into the program companion website that will change on a weekly basis. I’ve added a “view from my window” where students will send in pictures to be shared in the featured stories section of the website.

The fourth section asked for feedback on the development of the social and teaching presences. Responses centered on the use of a teacher avatar which seemed to be a key component to developing the teacher’s social presence and giving the impression that a real person was there with whom to interact. The comments provided affirmation, but little
suggestions for improvements. Upon reflection, a more detailed explanation of the teaching and social presences should have been provided to respondents to prompt more constructive feedback.

Outcome Evaluation

Valued feedback that I received in regard to the Virtual Homeroom was in an email from a parent whose daughter has been enrolled with eBlend for five years. This parent told me that “I'm very proud, and kind of surprised with how much she's been enjoying it. She excitedly tells me when someone else comments and I know she's looking forward to reading the other blogs.” Her daughter often attends Interaction days, but has always been a quiet and reserved student who takes a long time to make connections with others. This same parent also said that she hopes other students are also “enjoying that sense of community and the opportunity to share.”

Not all students have bought-in to the Virtual Homeroom; however, even the ones who do not participate regularly check on the forums. I can view the student activity logs within Moodle and can tell that students are looking at the forum discussions even if they aren’t participating.

Results of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

Review of the literature reinforced my belief that creating a sense of community and a safe online space are essential components to supporting students who are learning online. I firmly agree with Gibbs, Poskitt, Louwrens and Harnett that the relationships that the teacher builds with students is the most significant factor in fostering student engagement (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). The overarching theme that emerged from the
literature is that success in an online environment, particular for middle school-aged learners, is dependent on the community engagement and relationship building fostered by the teacher (Edwards, 2017; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). My own experience has shown that the students with whom I am able to build a strong connection, and whose parents with whom I am also able to build a meaningful relationship, have greater success as online learners.

The Virtual Homeroom is a tool that I will use to build relationships both with students and between students, one that will ultimately lead to a greater sense of community and increased engagement. Feedback from beta testing shows promise that this will be worthwhile and meaningful endeavour.

**Limitations and Opportunities**

Although the literature reveals the need to create an online environment that will support the development and maintenance of a community of learners, there are challenges to be overcome in order to do so effectively. For the Virtual Homeroom and companion website to be effective tools of building community engagement, a large time commitment is required in addition to the daily demands of teaching online. Furthermore, it also takes an increased amount of time and effort to get to know students, compared to face-to-face environments. There are few opportunities for quick conversations and easy connections to be made as would naturally happen in a traditional classroom.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In conducting my research, because of the lack of studies relating directly to middle school online learners, I found that I often had to make inferences, connections and draw my
own conclusions based on the available research in other contexts, such as face-to-face environments and blended and online high school and post-secondary settings. There is a general shortage of research that focuses on online learning in a K-12 setting, with most of that focusing on high school. There is an even greater scarcity of research in regard to asynchronous learning environments in middle school, and even less that mention continuous enrollment.

Additionally, much of the research assumes that online teachers are able to be content experts or work only with specific grades. However, DL teachers, particularly in the province of British Columbia, must often accommodate a wide span of grades and subject areas and cannot possibly be content experts in all subject areas (Barbour, M., and Adelstein, D., 2013). A further area of recommended research needs to be done to inform policy that supports class size and composition guidelines for the DL teachers in BC who work with multiples grades and courses. Furthermore, additional research is needed to affirm and confirm that a sense of community and belonging is key to student success in an online learning environment, the same as it is in a face-to-face environment.

Next Steps
As this was the first draft of a building a Virtual Homeroom, I knew there would be changes to make. The feedback was generally positive, and I did get the sense that overall, the goals of my project were achieved. While I am satisfied with the initial success of my project, I would like to continue exploring different strategies and tools to support building community engagement online. Now that I have built these virtual spaces, I am excited about using them to improve my practice. I look forward to applying what I have learned and will continue to develop and implement these virtual entities to build community with the students and families with whom I
work. My hope others also see the value in fostering community amongst online learners to engender greater student success in virtual learning environments, and that together we can create an even larger sense and feeling of community.
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Appendix A

The Virtual Home Room at a Glance
Appendix B

A View of Social Studies 9 for Comparison
Appendix C

Wednesday Art Lesson

The Dot

1. The Story

_The Dot_ is a story written and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds. We will be reading the story together on Wednesday and using it as inspiration for an art project.

If you are not able to come on Wednesday Sept. 26, you can follow along at home. Watch the video below to see the story being read and turn to the next page for instructions for the art activity.
Appendix D

September Rubric for Self-Assessment

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Consistently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active thinking and participation; focused; demonstrating curiosity, flexible and creative thinking; open to continuous learning</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to Learn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respects others’ right to learn; attends class on time; meets deadlines; brings supplies to class</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not give up, keeps trying even when challenged</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striving for Accuracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes great care to stay organized and strives to do his/her best; refers to criteria and examples to complete and improve work</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participates cooperatively, contributes to the thinking and work of the group, works well with others and respectfully considers their ideas</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies what he/she knows, understands and can do based on criteria and examples; sets goals and identifies next steps</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Consistently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Comments, Goals and/or Next Steps:
Appendix E

Companion Website Landing Page
Appendix F

Wednesday Blog Sample Post

Sept. 26

Emily Kobetitch | September 27, 2018

Thank you to everyone who as able to join us for a lovely day. To those who were unable to come, we hope to see you soon!

Today new and returning staff and students were welcomed as we all gathered together in the gym for the first assembly and luncheon of the school year. The assembly also marked Orange Shirt Day, which is a day to listen, learn and celebrate Aboriginal culture by honouring residential school survivors and their families. For some more information about Orange Shirt Day, please check out www.orangeshirtday.org

We had a slight change of plans and did not complete “The Dot” art lesson, but we will next week! Instead, in recognition of Orange Shirt Day, students were asked to reflect on what they can do to let someone else know that they matter. Then they drew and wrote those reflections on hand prints that are going to become part of school wide art installation that will go up on the wall by the ramp to downstairs. Check out this sample of awesome student work:
Appendix G

The Teacher Avatar