

Sense of Belonging in Online Learning Environments

Pilot Study – Jennifer Moore, M.S.

Doctor of Education, Fontbonne University

“If I survey students regarding their sense of belonging in online learning environments, in what ways, if any, will this influence the knowledge of how online courses are developed?”

Problem of Practice

Many psychologists are making the connections between a sense of belonging and students' ability to learn. In the psychological theory “the need to belong”, it is proposed that people's sense of belonging, their sense of good relationships with others, is a fundamental need. Maslow places social needs on the third of the five levels of the Hierarchy of Needs. Online learning has dramatically increased over the last decade. Traditional methods of teaching often fail to keep students' attention and engagement. It is reported that nationwide one in every four students are taking at least one online course. With the rising popularity, instructors and instructional designers need to be aware of the importance of cultural factors that influence learning experiences and academic performance in online environments. However, questions regarding the composition, role, efficacy, and workings of the virtual learning community remain unanswered.

Background

This pilot study is inspired by a study completed by Lapointe and Reissetter (2008) *Belonging online: Students' perceptions of the value and efficacy of an online learning community*, who were motivated to develop a clear understanding of learners' expectations so that online course design can effectively support deep and durable learning.



Methodology

- An online survey sent to specific online instructors, to be given to both undergraduate and graduate students.
- A convergent parallel/mixed methods research approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.
- Addressed students' experiences with a sense of belonging, the importance of a sense of belonging, and students' perception of the value and efficacy of an online learning community.
- Approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, the online survey will consist of Likert-scale questions, as well as open-ended questions.

Participants

The epistemological stance for this pilot study is using this survey to co-construct reality between the researcher and the participants, being shaped by the students' individual experiences. This pilot study is rooted in Vygotsky's Social Constructivists Theory of Learning. This theory promotes learning in the context of students playing an active role in their learning, therefore, shifting the roles of the teacher and students. This creates a learning environment where the teacher collaborates with the students, facilitates meaning construction, and a reciprocal learning experience.

Results

Elements of Online Learning

- Survey identified email communication, feedback, and discussion boards as being necessary for learning.

Online Learning

- Participants who reported an overall preference for online learning reported a positive relationship with the instructor.

Traditional Learning

- Participants who reported an overall preference for traditional learning reported distant feelings, different learning styles, and a negative relationship with the instructor.

Contact & References

Jennifer Moore
jmoore@fontbonne.edu

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“It may be said that the basic characteristic of human behavior, in general, is that humans personally influence their relations with the environment and through that environment personally change their behavior, subjugating it to their control.” Lev S. Vygotsky

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